

CHRISTIAN TRIPODI

**THE
UNKNOWN
ENEMY**

COUNTERINSURGENCY AND
THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL



The Unknown Enemy

Western counterinsurgency doctrine proposes that cultural intelligence is an important requirement for those forces operating amidst the unfamiliar sociopolitical structures often found in distant conflict zones. Yet while the determination to understand the intricate nature of alien societies may appear a rational undertaking in such circumstances, Christian Tripodi argues that these endeavours rarely help deliver success. The frictions of war and the complex human, cultural and political 'terrain' of the operating environment render such efforts highly problematic. In their attempts to generate and instrumentalise local knowledge for the purpose of exerting influence and control, Western military actors are drawn into the unwelcome realm of counterinsurgency as a form of political warfare. Their operating environment now becomes a space charged with phenomena that they rarely comprehend, rarely even see and over which they struggle to exert any meaningful control. All in pursuit of a victory that might literally mean nothing.

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The Unknown Enemy

Counterinsurgency and the Illusion of Control

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King's College London



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108424608

DOI: [10.1017/9781108341110](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108341110)

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First published 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tripodi, Christian, author.

Title: The unknown enemy : counterinsurgency and the illusion of control / Christian Tripodi, King's College London.

Other titles: Counterinsurgency and the illusion of control

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020020945 (print) | LCCN 2020020946 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108424608 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108440714 (paperback) | ISBN 9781108341110 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Counterinsurgency--History--20th century--Case studies. | Counterinsurgency--History--21st century--Case studies. | Intervention (International law)--Case studies.

Classification: LCC U241 .T765 2021 (print) | LCC U241 (ebook) | DDC 355.02/18--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020945>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020946>

ISBN 978-1-108-42460-8 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-44071-4 Paperback

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To Jo and Amy

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Preface

In the summer of 2009 in the Garmser district of Helmand Province, local elders began to arrive at the gates of Forward Operating Base (FOB) Delhi, home to 2nd Battalion, 8th Regiment of the US Marine Corps. There they would ask to speak with Carter Malkasian, a State Department official who had recently been appointed as the district's political officer. Observers noted Malkasian's remarkable rapport with these greybeards. A journalist reported,

The adoration ... stems from his unfailing politeness (he greeted people in the traditional Afghan way, holding their hands for several minutes as a series of welcomes and praises to God were delivered), his willingness to take risks (he often travelled around in a police pickup instead of an American armoured vehicle with a squad of Marines), and his command of Pashto, the language of Southern Afghanistan (he conversed fluently, engaging in rapid-fire exchanges with the elders).¹

Malkasian was a diplomat rather than a Marine, a US government official with a PhD from Oxford and a past that had included a career in academia as well as an earlier role as a political advisor to US forces in Iraq's Anbar province. But he was certainly there for the Marines' benefit. The relationships he built and the information he sought signified an attempt to generate a detailed picture not only of local tribal life in Garmser but of the intricacies and vagaries of the local political environment. Malkasian's endeavours were designed to allow the 2/8th to form a mental, and in due course graphic, representation of the local 'human terrain'; a phrase designed to describe the indigenous social and political structures within its area of operations. Such information would be used to inform their population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) methods, allowing the employment of a range of measures that would appeal to ordinary Afghans while simultaneously helping destroy, disable or even reconcile local Taliban elements in this part of southern Afghanistan. The extent of Malkasian's apparent value in this respect, particularly his ability to build trust with influential local actors, led to senior US officers

claiming the need '[f]or a Carter Malkasian in every district of Afghanistan'.²

Malkasian's role in Garsmer, and as part of a much wider COIN campaign in Afghanistan as a whole, is of genuine interest, partly because the description of his interaction with local elders (minus the reference to police pick-ups or Humvees) could have described, word for word, that of the typical British political officer operating a century beforehand just across the border with modern-day Pakistan in what was then the North-West Frontier Province of British India. From the courteous greeting in fluent Pashtu to the harvesting of fine detail with respect to local political atmospherics, this was stock-in-trade for the British tribal administrator. Even more so the laborious attempt to chart intricate tribal structures for the benefit of those military colleagues charged with quelling violence and insurrection in the region. In such ways the thoroughly modern US official and his British imperial predecessor were partaking in a remarkably similar enterprise. Projected into the midst of a hostile and unfamiliar society, these individuals were tasked not only with generating an understanding of that society, but doing so for the purpose of enhancing and refining systems of influence and control on the part of those military and political actors whose interests they represented.

Malkasian's presence in Garmser during that period of the conflict in Helmand is of greater interest than for its mere historical synchronicity, however. In a broader sense it draws attention to a host of issues intimately related to the theory and practice of modern-day COIN and stabilisation operations. The recent attempts at political transformation through force in Iraq and Afghanistan brought to the fore a series of considerations relating to the ways in which Western militaries might better comprehend the political, social, and cultural networks into which they had been projected: in particular, the ethnographic composition of these otherwise alien societies; the structures and alignments of political and social elites; and the loyalties, needs and wants of local populations. And with this new-found drive to 'understand' arrived a concomitant requirement to instrumentalise that understanding, to use such knowledge in ways that could aid the emergence of desired political outcomes. The thirst for so-called cultural intelligence as a fundamental component of modern population-centric COIN theory led not only to the appearance of characters such as Malkasian deep on the front line but also to the appearance of anthropologists, ethnographers and a variety of other social scientists within the military effort in both Iraq and Afghanistan as they sought to lend their expertise and insight on the socio-cultural domain to the design and prosecution of operations.

Yet as Malkasian's inadvertent mimicry of British colonial techniques illustrates, the drive to understand one's enemies and the populations and societies from which they stem is no modern doctrinal flash in the pan; it is an intellectual and practical preoccupation that has long concerned those charged with the business of conquest. The West in particular has exhibited a habitual tendency to try to project its authority into unknown or unfamiliar spaces; its efforts in this respect accompanied by various initiatives designed to generate an understanding of those spaces, often in support of transformative change. In that context we can re-examine Malkasian's presence in Garmser with a second important consideration in mind. To what extent did the forms of knowledge provided by this remarkable academic-cum-diplomat actually aid the prosecution of the COIN campaign there? In what way did his presence aid the defeat of local insurgents and contribute to a state of political and economic stability in Garmser? Despite the skill and determination of the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, despite an approach to COIN that focused on working with and through local communities, and despite Malkasian's presence, the US Marines failed to conclusively defeat the local Taliban. In this they were simply prey to the same basic dynamics that had applied to British political officers who, despite being embedded for years and potentially even decades within Pashtun tribal society and thoroughly conversant with local language, religion, custom and idiom, had nevertheless encountered some seventy years of concerted resistance to their authority, witnessed multiple outbreaks of widespread revolt, and failed to bring durable government control to bear upon key parts of the frontier.

At heart then, this study seeks to address a critical question. If Western militaries emphasise the need for a much fuller understanding of the peoples and cultures that they operate amongst as part of expeditionary COIN and stabilisation operations in particular, then what is the relationship between such forms of understanding and the success of these endeavours? While many academics and doctrine writers extol the virtues of increased socio-cultural understanding as critical to operational and strategic success in COIN and stabilisation, this study argues that the issue is far more nuanced. In particular it frames this thirst for local knowledge as being a fundamental aspect of a particular form of conflict, what this study terms 'political warfare'. It argues that the desire by military actors to achieve an understanding of local native society, of its cultures and attitudes, of its forms of political organisation and of its power structures and personalities has to be seen in the context of the ultimate objective, namely ambitious attempts by the intervening power to exert dominance, control or influence over that society. Warfare now

becomes a form of activity defined not simply by military action but also by the need to build political influence over the local population. But as this book illustrates, engaging – often violently – with the human, cultural and political ‘terrain’ of an unfamiliar society for the purpose of satisfying the grand designs of policymakers sat thousands of miles away often produces highly problematic and counterintuitive results. Our determination to understand the complex nature of alien societies may indeed be a rational response to the need to guide our actions more effectively therein, but when invited to inform the deeply complex task of manufacturing desired political outcomes through violence, that process becomes hostage to a variety of powerful shaping factors intrinsic to the processes at play. Hence the title of this study. While the ‘Unknown Enemy’ might appear at first glance to be an obvious reference to the stereotype of the shadowy insurgent, in reality it refers to those hidden factors that accompany the exercise of power in these circumstances, and which continually and negatively affect our attempts to deliver the outcomes sought.

Commentators will no doubt object to aspects of this book. Some may argue that it speaks to a form of military endeavour that we are unlikely to see again. That the era of liberal intervention, expeditionary COIN and nation-building is no more and that therefore the arguments proposed herein are most likely redundant, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. But as more perceptive observers note, claims as to the demise of these sorts of missions have been made before and have always proved premature in the face of the West’s desire to protect or advance its interests amidst the perpetual instability of the global system.³ The US government’s claims of ‘never again’ after the painful experience of Vietnam were followed a decade later by its interventions in Lebanon and Grenada. A decade after that came interventions in Somalia and Haiti. Predictably, within a further decade there was the conquest of Iraq and almost inevitably a decade after that a return to the same. Meanwhile, operations in Afghanistan have seen US and British forces inch their way toward their *third* decade in that country, while France risks being dragged into its own ‘forever’ war in Mali.⁴ These adventures appear to be a fundamental and unavoidable component of Western foreign policy and will likely continue to be so.

Others, alternatively, may argue that over the course of its pages this book appears to provide an overly bleak assessment of the utility of COIN and stabilisation operations in general. It may do but that is certainly not the intent. At heart the argument must simply be seen for what it is, namely a plea to recognise and acknowledge the very real problems associated with any activity whereby ambitious political objectives and the military designs that underpin them are exposed to the

inherently unpredictable nature of war, the intellectual distortions of military doctrine, the powerful preferences of military actors, and the seemingly innate pathologies that appear to repeatedly infect the export of power under such conditions. In this context the demand for greater understanding, for greater ‘cultural intelligence’ in the service of ambitious COIN and stabilisation operations, needs to recognise how the utility of such cherished forms of knowledge often rests at the mercy of powerful alternative forces.

Acknowledgements

No academic is an island. In that respect my genuine thanks go to the following people. Firstly to my colleague at King's College London's Defence Studies Department, David Morgan-Owen. Without his intellectual energy and prompting, the proposal for this book would never have seen the light of day. To my editor at Cambridge University Press, Michael Watson, who thankfully saw enough merit in my initial communications to consider the proposal worth pursuing, and to the three anonymous referees who provided rigour to that process. Thanks must also go to a number of individuals who responded to my entreaties at various points. Greg Daddis, Nicholas Krohley, Andrew Gawthorpe and Roberto J. Gonzales were all generous with their time. The itinerant explorer/academic Mike Martin, sometimes of King's College London, selflessly accepted the offer of a free lunch in a smart restaurant in return for patiently enduring my lowbrow intellectual enquiry on matters of military anthropology. Jacqueline Hazelton of the US Naval War College not only took the time to listen to my ideas on the fringes of a conference but was then doubly unfortunate to be selected as the only member of the wider academic community to be exposed to my work part way through the writing process and thus be on the receiving end of a bizarre collection of half-formed ideas and incomprehensible arguments. Her tolerant advice on both occasions was thankfully received and taken on board. Thanks also to Jon Askonas; our brief chat outside the Radcliffe Camera that afternoon was more valuable to this project than you could possibly imagine. And a huge *merci* also to Clémence Hautefort, whose patient grasp of my vague direction and whose efforts in gathering and translating material from the French archives were absolutely invaluable. Thanks lastly to Anthony King, of Warwick University. You reminded me that perhaps the most important thing is not simply to strive to be right, *per se*. Rather it is to always strive to elevate the debate and to force those who might seek to prove you wrong to improve their own arguments in turn, thus strengthening the health of the discipline as a whole.

Writing a book isn't simply about professional support, however. Without the encouragement of friends and family it's unlikely that one can generate and sustain the mental energy required to turn vague ideas into a finished project, particularly while coping with all the other important aspects of life. In that respect certain individuals stand out. To Julie-Clare; a true friend and one whose kindness and selflessness helped create the peace and stability to allow me to pursue this project. To Paul and Chris, two warrior-intellectuals whose propensity for deep, penetrating and questioning thought is effortlessly balanced by their equal propensity for sending me an endless stream of highly distracting internet memes. To Kenneth Payne, a colleague and friend who both keeps spirits up and also helps me sink them on a very regular basis. Long live our regular sessions at Moya's in Oxford, and the hazy mornings that follow. To Geraint Hughes; a superb scholar and a unique individual, one who constantly restores my faith in humanity. To my brother Liam, simply one of my favourite human beings. And to Stephen, for the many, many years of cheerful and uncomplaining support.

Lastly, a moment of reflection. A few months before completing this book I received news that the Cambridge University political scientist Aaron Rapport had died at the tragically young age of thirty-eight. As an avid consumer of his superb scholarship I had first invited him to speak at the UK Defence Academy in 2017. Such was the students' appetite for his rapid-fire wisdom that he had returned the following year, and again in May 2019 when he journeyed down from Cambridge to give his customarily brilliant, energetic and witty talk. Yet unbeknownst to us, his audience, he did so whilst labouring in the final stages of a terminal illness. It was to be his last lecture, and he passed away the following month. Many have spoken in praise of him as a brilliant intellect and a remarkable teacher. He was both of those things, but he was also just a wonderful bloke.

1 Culture Warriors

‘To the colonial mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: “I know my natives”, a claim which implied two things at once. Firstly that the native was really quite simple and secondly that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand – understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding.’¹

In 2006 a novel and highly publicised evolution in military affairs emerged at the hands of US military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Functioning under the moniker of the Human Terrain System (HTS), it promised a fundamentally different way of approaching the perennial problem of countering violent insurgency and so establishing the conditions required for security, stability and the sorts of political change ultimately envisaged by the United States and its coalition partners. Operating as part of a radically redesigned population-centric COIN doctrine, the HTS sought to present US forces (and those of its allies) with a highly informed understanding of the structures, sentiments, loyalties and designs of the local population among whom coalition forces operated. This, it was believed, comprised perhaps the most decisive audience when seeking to win the COIN battle. Anthropologists, ethnographers and other social scientists operating in the field would provide military commanders with the necessary insights to more surgically tailor their efforts to understanding the local population, thereby enabling that vital constituency to be more accurately factored into tactical actions and operational designs. The emphasis behind this evolution was clear. Understanding the environment one operates in and in particular its socio-political structures and its ‘human terrain’ is a fundamental ingredient of success in any COIN campaign, stabilisation operation or expeditionary intervention. As the celebrated COIN expert David Kilcullen stated, there could be no substitute for analysis provided by ‘extremely deep local area and cultural knowledge’.² Other analysts agree, stating that in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan, ‘it became obvious that

understanding the cultural landscape, including ethnic and tribal affiliations, was foundational to any kind of military success'.³ Without such understanding, the argument goes, our militaries are destined to operate blind, uncomprehending of the insights necessary to leverage influence within that population from whom the insurgents will draw support and upon those who hold the keys to power. In the words of both General David Petraeus and the HTS's then chief advocate Montgomery McFate, if the indigenous population is the so-called 'centre of gravity' in COIN and complex stabilisation operations then this form of socio-cultural knowledge is an absolutely critical component in achieving success.⁴ The Human Terrain Team (HTT) handbook spelled out precisely what was at stake:

The human dimension is the very essence of irregular warfare environments. Understanding local cultural, political, social, economic, and religious factors is crucial to successful counter-insurgency and stability operations ... The human aspect of the environment becomes central to mission success.⁵

Such sentiments are logical and plausible. They are also highly misleading. The benefits of understanding the fine detail of the human and political terrain of a particular operating environment would seem self-explanatory, but such understanding must be understood for what it is: not an end in itself but a *means to an end*. In both Iraq and Afghanistan the ultimate intent of conjoining social science and COIN was to create a more effective route to the establishment of military and political control. This new-found understanding was designed not simply to distinguish between friend and foe but to function as an aid to forms of social engineering; an instrumental capability whereby societies could be understood, attitudes changed, allegiances formed or manipulated, enemies turned, power brokers created and sustained, and new systems of political rule implemented. It was, in other words, about informing actionable outcomes. Herein lies the point of this study. There remains a powerful strain of thought within modern military doctrine that views 'cultural competency' as being a fundamental requirement for effective war-fighting in environments characterised by unfamiliar social, political and religious forms of organisation. The rationale being that by more accurately understanding such things one is better placed to understand the effects of one's actions in relation to them and better placed in general to tailor one's methods. In that sense, 'understanding' not only provides a window onto the intricacies of local societies and the sinews of influence within but also provides the kind of purchase upon them necessary to guide intervening forces more surely toward their ultimate strategic objectives.

However, such a vision rests upon a number of important assumptions. Is the necessary understanding achievable in the ways envisaged? Can unfamiliar social, cultural and political systems be deciphered with the degree of accuracy required to provide external military actors with a genuine basis for action? Do the capabilities designed to achieve and digest this information automatically lead to their employment in a fashion designed to most likely aid campaign success? And how exactly does this knowledge aid the emergence of favourable new realities according to the interests of those that wield them? These basic questions are important in themselves but lead us onward to further considerations about some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning the use of military power in these circumstances. Ultimately they query whether ambitious, transformational interventions of the sort witnessed in Iraq and Afghanistan for example can *ever* really work in the way that they are intended.

The Cultural 'Turn' in War

The forms of understanding required to aid not only in the conquest of new territories and peoples but also the establishment of political control over them are not a new thing. They were certainly a preoccupation of the European imperial powers from the late nineteenth century onwards, as well as Cold War counterinsurgents, as will be shown. But such preoccupations lay largely in abeyance in the post-Vietnam era until the emergence of Al Qaeda and the rise of Islamic insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq began to encourage observers to prioritise an understanding of their new adversaries. From Christopher Coker's identification of a distinctly 'Islamic' way in war or Robert Johnson's nuanced identification of a distinctly 'Afghan' variant of the same, commentators such as Jonathan Kaplan and Victor Davis Hanson extended the argument further, articulating the ways in which ethnicity and heritage shape propensities toward (and success within) conflict, leading toward a promotion of the belief that understanding the culture of one's enemies was now the 'soul' of modern insurgency/counterinsurgency.⁶ Consequently, after the initial armed interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, there (re-)emerged into modern military thought a firmly held belief in the importance of 'cultural understanding' and the ways that this could materially benefit military actors undertaking COIN operations in these challenging new environments. Overall there appeared a powerful tendency to subscribe to the notion that 'culture' and other forms of local knowledge mattered hugely in respect to these forms of conflict.⁷ As a consequence, a highly receptive climate greeted the emergence of a new breed of

military anthropologists to whom the matter of cultural expertise and associated forms of knowledge was a fundamental ingredient in their conceptualisation of how to fight modern irregular conflicts.⁸

A manifestation of this would be the Human Terrain System (HTS) which, in the words of its progenitors, was designed to improve operational decisions and chances for mission success not only by way of an increased understanding of local cultural, ideological, religious and tribal allegiances but also by helping avoid unintended second-order effects resulting from a lack of understanding of the local 'human terrain'. The HTS attracted much favourable attention. Reports of anthropologists navigating the dangerous confines of these increasingly testing insurgencies played well with a media hungry for evidence of a new approach to failing campaigns.⁹ In association with the sudden emergence in late 2006 of a brand-new COIN doctrine in the form of Field Manual (FM) 3-24, itself heavily influenced by social science, the HTS appeared to be evidence of a paradigm shift in COIN; from a seeming reliance upon brutal kinetic measures to a far more intelligent, informed application of knowledge and insight that sought to apply military action in a discerning and constructive fashion, one that incorporated local knowledge and sentiment in its designs. As Kilcullen, one of the influential authors of FM 3-24, observed, 'the key is to first diagnose the environment, then design a tailor-made approach to counter the insurgency, and – most critically – have a system for generating continuous, real-time feedback from the environment that allows you to know what effect you are having, and adapt as needed'.¹⁰ To its supporters, the HTS offered a critical capability in that respect.¹¹

Yet amidst this broad consensus as to the central importance of the socio-cultural aspect of the War on Terror, there emerged a thoughtful and critical response that challenged the notion of such matters as fixed and deterministic. The historian-cum-International-Relations scholar Patrick Porter in particular pushed back against the so-called cultural turn in war, arguing against the apparently instinctive and powerfully held belief on the part of academics and strategists who viewed the global war on terrorism as '[a] clash of profoundly different cultures, between American-led forces on one side, and jihadist warriors or tribal warlords on the other'. He proposed that this encouraged an overly determinist view of the tangled relationship between war and culture. In its aim to encourage greater sensitivity to the nuances that differentiate cultures it actually encouraged a crude view of ancient and fixed ways of war. As Porter stated, it risked replacing strategy with stereotypes.¹² The significance of his argument was its willingness to apply rigour to a debate populated by such slippery concepts as 'culture' or 'understanding'. By

revealing the flawed assumptions inherent to the way in which we characterise such concepts in the broadest terms, Porter and others opened the door to a far more thoughtful mode of enquiry in general when it came to this debate.¹³ What should we be trying to understand, exactly? Why should we understand it? To what extent, and to what ends? What or whom should we use to help us understand it? How will we know when we have succeeded in understanding it? And perhaps most important of all: what are those 'unknown knowns' that cause us to understand things in the way that we do?¹⁴

The requirement to adopt a more questioning mindset in this respect was emphasised by examination of certain of the publications that emerged during the period of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan and since, and which are typical of an overwhelming confidence in the ability of militaries to gather, interpret and then instrumentalise 'local' knowledge in order to better do stabilisation, COIN and pacification operations. Broadly speaking, these themes have been promoted with varying degrees of emphasis by three groups: those academics, often drawn from the fields of social science and entwined within Professional Military Education (PME) who firmly extol the advantages of such knowledge in improving the performance of militaries engaged in such activities; those doctrine writers (often heavily influenced by the aforementioned academic cohort) who have absorbed such recommendations and used them to form the basis of tactical and operational manuals of war; and most recently those political scientists who have advocated the use of 'big data' to more properly understand the myriad complex factors affecting the course of violence in indigenous societies subject to armed intervention, with the intention of better informing the techniques of military actors in particular.

Culture Warriors

The first cohort are represented by any number of publications that emerged courtesy of initial missteps in Iraq and Afghanistan. One example is *Solving the People Puzzle: Cultural Intelligence and Special Operations Forces*.¹⁵ This was designed to promote the notion of cultural intelligence (or Cultural Quotient: CQ) as a fundamental ingredient of success in the COIN and stabilisation operations then being undertaken by the Canadian army in Afghanistan. But the intellectual justification for such an approach simply raises more questions than it answers. Like many works on the subject, it adheres firmly to the notion that 'culture' in all its myriad respects comprises the centre of gravity when it comes to expeditionary interventions, insofar as an understanding of the

indigenous culture leads toward favourable outcomes for the counter-insurgent. Alternative perspectives, i.e. that culture is inherently mutable or plays a relatively subordinate role in conditioning protagonists' actions, are entirely absent from the debate. From there we are led to the highly questionable presumption that the requisite 'CQ' can be acquired quickly and with relatively little difficulty even by military actors largely unfamiliar with the concepts at play. And ultimately we are subject to the recommendation that once acquired, it can then be conceptualised as an instrument of power and influence with a clearly definable relationship between its employment on the one hand, and the outcomes that one seeks to engineer on the other. As the author states in an additional study, '[T]he whole idea of cultural intelligence refers to the capacity to understand and effectively respond to the beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals and groups under complex and changing circumstances *in order to effect a desired change*' (author's italics).¹⁶ A similar and even more ambitious argument comes courtesy of Dr Paula Holmes-Eber, former professor of operational culture at the Marine Corps University, Quantico. The focus of Holmes-Eber's enquiries is less the significance of culture in war per se than the intellectual evolutions undertaken by the US Marine Corps (USMC) which allow it to accommodate the notion of culture as a variable within its own planning processes. The results are instructive, as an extract from her work *Culture in Conflict: Irregular Warfare, Culture Policy, and the Marine Corps* reveals:

The "culture concept" has been reshaped and reworked to fit into Marine Corps organizational processes, identity, and ways of seeing the world ... a standardized "one size fits all" culture and language training framework ... which can easily be adapted to any culture or country to which Marines may suddenly deploy ... Culture becomes, then, "a tool in the kitbox" – a skill like shooting a rifle or flying an airplane – that Marines can use to achieve the mission wherever they may be sent.¹⁷

The notion that forms of socio-cultural understanding can be seized upon, shaped and 'Marinized' in order to create a uniform approach to operations anywhere on the planet is perhaps understandable from the perspective of the military planning mind but is still scarcely believable, raising as it does a multitude of questions as to how such conformity should even begin to function in practice.¹⁸ Similarly problematic assumptions are evident in the 2014 edited collection *Culture, Conflict and Counterinsurgency*, a work that sought to draw together a range of intellectual approaches in discussing the thorny matter of cultural understanding and its relevance to the campaign in Afghanistan. The

belief that such understanding was nothing less than fundamental to the success of the military effort there can be judged by the proposition that embracing the cultural dimension of the conflict would allow the possibility of a 'meaningful and enduring victory' in that country.¹⁹ Seen from this perspective, some of the chapter titles are instructive. 'Incorporating Cultural Intelligence into Joint Intelligence: Cultural Intelligence and Ethnographic Intelligence Theory'; 'Employing Data Fusion in Cultural Analysis and COIN in Tribal Social Systems'; and lastly 'The Use of Evolutionary Theory in Modelling Culture and Cultural Conflict'. Aimed firmly at the military establishment, these titles promised three distinct things: firstly, that culture is a defining element of conflict; secondly, that it can be understood in technical terms and then be incorporated into military planning; and lastly that such understanding promises to those that possess it the ability not simply to comprehend, but to influence and control. The latter point is certainly emphasised by Andrew MacKay and Steve Tatham's *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and Their Motivations Will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict*. Former British military officers with decades of service between them in Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq and Afghanistan, the authors promote the notion that military actors engaged in COIN and stabilisation operations can achieve transformative political and psychological effects upon target societies and their populations through the application of behavioural economics theory. Dismissing the traditional vision of the population as comprising simple rational choice actors, the authors proposed instead the adoption of advanced psychological theories that recognise human decision-making as a flawed, irrational and confusing process, and which can by extension allow more informed 'messaging' and 'framing' of choices to achieve operational and strategic effect. As the book states, 'influence is all about learning what the right levers are, and how to apply them'.²⁰

Perhaps the most forthright advocate of the 'social science' approach during the era of Iraq and Afghanistan was the anthropologist Montgomery McFate. It should be emphasised that there is much food for thought in McFate's more recent and hugely interesting work on anthropology in the age of empire.²¹ But between 2003 and 2011 and over the course of a number of publications and as one of the original progenitors of the HTS, McFate was at the forefront of social science's 'march' onto the battlefield, a trajectory reflected in 2011's *Social Science Goes to War: The Human Terrain System in Iraq and Afghanistan*.²² Within, McFate would claim that by improving commanders' situational awareness and thus improving resultant courses of action HTS's so-called combat ethnographers had materially enhanced the operational

effectiveness of military units in both conflicts.²³ HTS and its subordinate HTTs enabled units to '[r]educ[e] kinetic operations, develop more effective courses of action, improve situational awareness, improve consequence management, increase support for host nation government, improve humanitarian assistance efforts, improve village assessments and decrease attacks by enemy forces'.²⁴

McFate's powerful advocacy of the importance of socio-cultural knowledge to the conflicts then underway in Iraq and Afghanistan has, directly or indirectly, informed a wealth of recent doctrinal development in the field of COIN and stabilisation.²⁵ But there appear to be some fundamental problems inherent to this intertwining of COIN and culture, as reflected in the work of Johnson, Zelen *et al.*, where contributors casually trot out terms such as 'fusion', 'analysis', 'systems' and 'models', contributing to the notion that social control of the human landscape can be achieved by visualising, recording and manipulating key variables within that environment.²⁶ Aside from these dubious assumptions, such theories fail to take account of similar 'systems' approaches adopted by the colonial powers over a century ago and which sought to apply scientific methodologies to the business of understanding and influencing indigenous societies, but which found these to be of marginal use in delivering peace and stability. Secondly, all of the aforementioned studies, and indeed the cultural 'turn' in general, tend to advocate a ground-up approach to understanding the ways in which COIN campaigns are won or at least resolved, and thereby ignore the fundamental importance of the way that policy sets objectives and thus dictates the context within which military power is exercised. Thirdly, they skirt serious moral and ethical issues related to the phenomenon of expeditionary COIN and stabilisation operations. As the authors of *Culture, Conflict and Counterinsurgency* state in their introduction, '[S]uccessful militaries must be culturally informed if they are to be successful in invasion, occupation and counterinsurgency'.²⁷ But as the anthropologist David H. Price observes, the mere mention of terms such as invasion and occupation raises immediate ethical objections: the social science technocrat is essentially advocating the cultivation of 'full spectrum' dominance over those that they seek to control.²⁸ Not only is this a largely indefensible objective in the minds of the academic rank and file who may then avoid assisting the military effort, but the emergence of private sector 'applied anthropologists' to fill the void only diminishes the effectiveness of the social-science aspect. And last but not least, all of these works neglect to acknowledge the highly problematic way in which war delivers results. The acquisition of 'understanding', the employment of that understanding at the tactical and operational levels via various military and

non-military forms of action, and the subsequent emergence (or otherwise) of effects at the strategic and political level form so complex and non-linear a process in terms of the relationships at play as to cast doubt on whether any such positive causal relationship can be established.²⁹ Without acknowledging the way in which war actually 'works', advocates of the social science approach deprive themselves of a hugely important set of considerations in proving the validity of their claims.

Advocates of the culture approach are not blind to such objections, of course. In *Social Science Goes to War*, Mc Fate provided a robust defence of the concept that was in many respects not only perfectly justifiable but sorely needed after the publication in 2013 of a highly critical report that savaged numerous aspects of the HTS programme.³⁰ But even taking to heart its positives, that defence still failed to provide a satisfactory analysis of the utility of cultural understanding in support of complex expeditionary COIN and stabilisation campaigns. It provided no empirical evidence to support claims that cultural knowledge makes any difference to military outcomes, acknowledging instead that its utility was essentially subjective and anecdotal.³¹ Claimed successes looked impressive but were unable to prove that HTTs provided US forces with a decisive advantage.³² It also portrayed the HTS's use of ethnographic understanding in support of COIN and stabilisation operations as a stand-alone initiative almost unparalleled in history. It did not therefore place the HTS into any form of intellectual trajectory in this respect and thus masked the inconvenient fact that the instrumentalisation of socio-cultural knowledge by military actors has, historically, been plagued by repetitive problems. And ultimately, with an eye on events taking place in 2007–10, at the height of its activities, the claimed successes of the HTS appear far more questionable with the passing of time.³³

The Doctrine Writers

The second type of publication that reveals a host of assumptions regarding the importance of local understanding in war, and the requirement for military actors to engage with and understand such matters, is doctrine, particularly the celebrated FM 3-24 (Counterinsurgency), published in late 2006 at the height of the campaign in Iraq. Updated in 2018, it remains largely unchanged.³⁴ Like nearly all military doctrines on this subject, it describes how the population constitutes the strategic 'centre of gravity'; an article of faith that still underpins mainstream teaching on the subject of COIN. It goes on to promote the importance of what it terms a population-centric approach to combating insurgency,

the significance of understanding that population, and from that a number of educational, technical and operational initiatives designed to increase that understanding: cultural training, smart cards, biometrics, partnering with host nation forces and so forth. Knowledge and understanding became central to this process as far as FM 3-24 was concerned: in the sense not only of enabling its readers and adherents to grasp the method and purpose of COIN per se, but of preparing them for the task of wielding military power in the midst of unfamiliar social and cultural realms which, in the words of the doctrine, requires a sophisticated understanding of socio-cultural factors in the local context.³⁵ The original FM 3-24's influence upon thinking of counterinsurgency in those terms has been widespread and lasting. In 2009 the US Joint Chiefs of Staff issued guidance that newly commissioned officers have a thorough working understanding of the concept of 'culture' and its importance to the contemporary operating environment.³⁶ In 2010 General Michael Flynn, the chief International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) intelligence officer in Afghanistan, determined that the intelligence services devote themselves to answering fundamental questions 'about the environment we operate in and the people we are trying to protect and persuade'.³⁷ Western COIN and stabilisation doctrine maintains an explicit emphasis upon the value of socio-cultural understanding to tactical and operational commanders. In its 2012 analysis of the enduring 'lessons' from a decade of COIN at that point, the US Joint Chiefs proposed that the primary requirement was the need for a '[g]reater understanding of the environment', particularly ethnic and tribal identities, religion, culture and politics.³⁸ Australian army COIN doctrine promotes the notion of a 'complex human terrain', of 'cultural competence and capability' and the requirement for a deep understanding of the target population including political, social and cultural organisation and structures.³⁹ Its French counterpart meanwhile advocates the need for 'a sense of where we operate ... an understanding of the human environment and what the expectations of local leaders and populations are'.⁴⁰ The British military pushed forward even further. The emergence in 2010 of an *entire* doctrine relating to the question of 'understanding' (subsequently updated in 2016) was significant insofar as it represented the first commissioning of a manual of war specifically devoted to this subject in and of itself.⁴¹ The trend was further bolstered by a raft of overarching doctrines such as the 'Integrated Approach', which now emphasise the primary importance of 'understanding' in enabling the more informed and effective employment of Britain's armed forces in irregular conflict scenarios in particular, and which stipulate such understanding as being *fundamentally* instrumental in nature.⁴² As for FM

3-24, its update in 2018 reinforces the importance of socio-cultural intelligence in COIN, emphasising that

Sociocultural analysis is the analysis of adversaries and other relevant actors that integrates concepts, knowledge, and understanding of societies, populations, and other groups, including their activities, relationships, and perspectives, across time and space at varying scales ... An enhanced ability to analyze the sociocultural factors provides the potential to predict, respond to, and/or influence decision-making and associated behavior by the relevant actors.⁴³

The doctrine then lists a number of capabilities required to enhance this process, including the 'mapping' of socio-cultural factors, a focus on 'human geography', 'socio-cultural dynamics' analysis, 'human factors' analysis, social network analysis, and the broader use of social science in general. The technical detail is impressive. But there are evident question marks over the way in which doctrine serves its purpose in understanding certain phenomena. From a historian's perspective, the post-2001 recrudescence of COIN as a field of study after a nearly four-decade-long hiatus led to the rushed promotion and consumption of bad history to fill the gap in practical expertise. This led to the questionable selection of writers such as T.E. Lawrence, Mao Zedong and David Galula as key intellectual reference points for the modern counterinsurgent. Publications like FM 3-24 and, by extension, other national doctrines continue to draw heavily upon theories of insurgency that subscribe to a standardised perspective of human motivation during civil war; the type of conflict that frequently comprises the backdrop to those expeditionary COIN, stabilisation and nation-building efforts that usually provide the context for attempts at political warfare. This leads onward to automatic assumptions regarding the role of the counterinsurgent that often misinterpret the true motivations guiding the population's behaviour in such conflicts. They also tend to shy away from acknowledging the messy reality of COIN, a realm of activity that depending upon circumstance may be legitimately required to reject a population-centric focus.⁴⁴ The result is an uneasy mix of intellectual traditions that cherry-picks aspects of social science theory, history and strategic studies to ensure as neat a fit as possible. Hence 'human terrain', a concept that frames human society as something measurable, static and predictable; an inert body over which the insurgent and counterinsurgent compete. The reality, of course, is that human societies of all sorts are complex and reactive systems composed of myriad actors pursuing any variety of individual or collective schemes and ambitions, many of which have little to do with the goal of stability and security.⁴⁵ But just as importantly, the cultural 'turn' in doctrine allowed the (re)flourishing of a core set of assumption

about the possibility of using military power as an instrument of social and political change. No longer simply a tool to defeat insurgency, COIN was now once again an instrument suitable for the purposes of ambitious social engineering and the radical adjustment of native political traditions. Once military planners in Afghanistan and Iraq were presented with a doctrine that placed human society at the focus of enquiry, their attempt to conceptualise social reality in recognisable and familiar physical terms reflected an inherent belief that if that social reality could be understood and codified then it could be controlled and even redesigned. But for those on the ground charged with such responsibilities, the implications are remarkable. As one observer put it,

Imagine a Brazilian dropped into Islamabad. Imagine asking them, without speaking the language or having any idea who to trust, to create, staff and monitor an entirely new form of Government. What's more, imagine asking them to do this in six months, while fighting a war and after having accidentally killed hundreds of civilians.⁴⁶

Big Data

The final dimension to the 'understanding' debate is a recent one and comes at things from a rather different angle. It is provided by the advocates of the quantitative approach to understanding 'small wars', namely those political scientists who believe that vast amounts of raw data can now be analysed in sufficient depth to provide a far more layered and intimate understanding of the dynamics of violence within those societies targeted by Western interventions; a granular level of detail relating not simply to matters of culture, attitudes and beliefs (and thus potential malleability), but real-time observation of actions, behaviours and habits and how military actors can use this information to better navigate their way through the myriad challenges of operating in such alien environments. 'Big Data' seemingly holds the key to unlocking the problems of 'Small Wars'. On the surface this thesis is more persuasive than that offered by advocates of the ethnographic/anthropological approach. Rather than proposing vague and highly contestable claims of utility/success, the big data advocates provide reams of charts and graphs that convincingly support their analysis, observations and recommendations as to what needs to be done to positively influence the behaviour of key groups and actors within local society. They even promise to offer a far more persuasive grasp of the critical relationship between cause and effect, a dimension that the ethnographic/anthropological tradition was generally unable to satisfy.⁴⁷ But even if one accepts

the intellectual evidence underpinning this approach to understanding 'small', i.e. 'political', wars, the big data thesis is forced to offer important caveats. Firstly, there are question marks over the utility of data to accurately measure political atmospherics. In his review of Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro's landmark analysis of the decline in violence in Iraq in 2007, Austin Long points to the quantitative data used, which in this instance was drawn mainly from the US Command's Significant Activity (SIGACT) Database which recorded all instances of violence involving US and Iraqi forces, insurgents, or sectarian militias, and which formed the basis for much of the article's analysis.⁴⁸ Long argues that whilst SIGACTs did track at least some violence, that violence in and of itself did not necessarily provide much information about local political dynamics.⁴⁹ And the data-driven approach offers other perhaps even more important caveats, fully acknowledged by its proponents. Namely, while the big data approach offers a novel, quicker and hopefully less costly route to winning the 'village battle', it offers no real answers to how to translate that victory into winning the overall war. It might aid the tactical undertaking of COIN and stabilisation operations, but it cannot speak to the ideological imperatives, political decisions and policy interactions that occur far from the battlefield, and thus far from the data. Neither, realistically, can it penetrate the indigenous social realm in any meaningful sense. As Anna Simon notes, 'It is unlikely that Western software engineers will ever be able to effectively duplicate non-western ways of navigating the non-western world.'⁵⁰

The Policymaker

As already noted, aside from the more direct tactical and operational claims of utility, there are also question marks over claims as to the broader importance of cultural intelligence when it comes to the higher-level strategic and policymaking dimensions of COIN and stabilisation operations. In 2005 for example, McFate argued that there had been a misplaced belief on the part of US policymakers that the civilian apparatus of government in Iraq would be able to withstand the removal of Saddam Hussein from power. What was missing, she continued, was the realisation that Iraqi politics would inevitably revert to a tribal system in the absence of the Ba'athist regime, thus hugely complicating any attempt to construct a recognisably democratic system of governance.⁵¹ This belief that socio-cultural intelligence could influence the highest levels of policymaking was not only reiterated in *Social Science Goes to War* but was similarly articulated in Christopher Sims's sympathetic analysis of the HTS when he proposed that 'understanding the historical

trajectory of a region through social, economic, and political lenses, including as much engagement with communities as security allows, can create powerful platforms for policy formation'.⁵²

Of course, McFate had been entirely correct in her analysis, but the unavoidable implication was that the absence of such crucial insights was somehow connected to the then lack of qualified cultural specialists – hence their requirement going forward so as to prevent similar errors being committed in the future. Yet policymakers place little emphasis on such granular understanding when it comes to the formulation of statecraft. As Louis Halle writes, foreign policy is made on the basis of an image of the external world that lies in the minds of those who make that policy. 'In the degree that the image is actually and philosophically false, no technicians, however proficient, can make the policy that is based on it sound.'⁵³ The fact that Donald Rumsfeld, the US secretary of state for defence during the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003 respectively, was reportedly unaware of even what languages were spoken in the former illustrates that senior US officials were in thrall to an ideological fervour and need for action rather than the patient requirement to harvest a detailed understanding of Iraq's tribal and sectarian composition for example, and to use such information as the basis for subsequent action.⁵⁴ Similar accusations were levelled at British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the same period.⁵⁵ 'Problems' such as Iraq were so fundamental to their respective political ideologies that the subtleties of its historical, tribal or societal condition simply did not impinge upon deliberations.⁵⁶ Instead, they displayed certainties typical of policymakers in such situations, namely that the military conflict would be short, that local political allies would be reliable and that the intervention would not alter the political landscape of the targeted state except in the ways intended.⁵⁷

Here lies a fundamental aspect of the debate, namely the relationship between information and advice of the sort advocated by McFate, Sims *et al.* and the actual decision-making process that frequently propels states into overly ambitious interventions in places like Vietnam or Afghanistan, endeavours so ambitious that no degree of ground-level understanding can direct military actions to contribute meaningfully to the bloated objectives sought. Persuaded of the notion that policymakers are receptive to the sort of knowledge privileged by themselves, adherents of the 'cultural turn' and indeed countless others in the academy concerned with the study of COIN and the War on Terror have consistently overstated the extent to which socio-cultural intelligence or other forms of technical detail might make any significant difference to strategic decision-making.

This is a critical point. A significant proportion of the sort of interventions studied in this book feature military or government actors placed in positions whereby local knowledge is of little real utility and whereby the decision to intervene, and the objectives of that intervention, are far removed from such considerations. As political and social scientists illustrate with respect to two of the chosen examples, in the form of the Vietnam War and the invasion of Iraq in 2003, powerful processes are at play that rob such information of any weight or utility. In relation to the former, Dominic Johnson and Kenneth Payne both illustrate the influence of deep-rooted psychological processes (individual and group-based) in dictating decision-making. Johnson explains the tendency toward motivational bias and the resultant 'positive illusions' that conspire to generate massive overconfidence in one's ability to prevail in achieving the given objective; in this instance the defeat of the forces of communist subversion that were already firmly embedded in local society, and the simultaneous construction from the ground up of an entirely new South Vietnamese state.⁵⁸ Alternatively, Payne points toward powerful emotional factors, such as 'esteem', as integral to understanding the behaviour of leaders such as Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson in deciding firstly to intervene in Vietnam and subsequently to escalate the US military presence there in search of a military-political victory that seemed increasingly unfeasible. Their behaviours, shaped by deep-rooted evolutionary impulses that exerted an inexorable influence on their decision-making, meant that politicians and policymakers became the epitome of the 'unconscious strategist'.⁵⁹ Aaron Rapport meanwhile dissects the US-led invasion of Iraq 2003 by examining the complex cognitive processes underpinning the decision to democratise that country by force. He proposed that the distant objective of translating the armed overthrow of the regime into the emergence of a peaceful, democratic state was evaluated largely on the high desirability of that goal. A far greater sense of optimism attended the former, more distant, objective of political transformation than the more immediate problem of military conquest. This pattern of what Rapport identified as 'abstract construal' had the overall effect of reducing estimates of post-war problems and costs and encouraging massively over-optimistic assessments about the political conditions that would exist in Iraq subsequent to the intervention.⁶⁰

What these and other scholars illustrate is that endeavours of the sort examined in this book are commonly decided at the highest levels on the basis of dominant ideological or strategic imperatives. These act in alliance with immensely powerful yet largely subconscious psychological and cognitive constraints and heuristics that tend to prioritise speed

rather than detail when it comes to decision-making. Such powerful shaping factors almost inevitably end up placing specialised forms of knowledge such as human or socio-cultural intelligence in a space entirely divorced from the strategic ambitions at play. The result is predictable. Rather than shaping policy, the social scientist or big data proponent is, realistically, tasked with a far less inviting task, namely to help make conditions on the ground somehow bend towards the satisfaction of pre-selected objectives decided by policymakers sitting thousands of miles away.

Counterinsurgency As Political Warfare

In an attempt to properly explore some of the issues raised, this book provides a historical and theoretical study of the way in which the arguments advocated relate to the prosecution of what it terms 'political warfare'. It is worth clarifying at the outset precisely what this is intended to mean. Among academics, policymakers and the wider defence establishment the term is generally associated with the notion of so-called Grey Zone warfare, and certain of the methods that contemporary actors such as Russia, China or Iran might choose in order to confuse and manipulate opponents in an environment short of outright war. The phrase can roughly be traced from George F. Kennan's 1948 definition of political warfare as, 'the logical use of Clausewitz's doctrine in times of peace ... the use of all means at a nation's disposal, short of war, to achieve its objectives'.⁶¹ In Kennan's eyes this ranged from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures and 'white' propaganda to covert operations such as the clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, psychological warfare or the support of underground resistance movements.⁶²

But the alternative concept of political warfare as described throughout this book is a much narrower one than that articulated by Kennan, and one with a much more direct and distinctly military application. As articulated by scholars such as Colin Jackson, Dierk Walter and Emile Simpson, the concept of political warfare used here is tightly (indeed perhaps inherently) connected to the practice of COIN/Stabilisation.⁶³ In this particular model, unlike the Clausewitzian norm where military power is used to create the conditions that allow the imposition, by the political class, of a favourable political settlement upon an opponent, military actors instead use violence and associated forms of influence and control (through operational methods such as COIN or stabilisation) as a way of seeking *direct* political outcomes. As Walter describes it, instead of creating the military conditions for a political victory, COIN now

becomes a way of drawing political measures into the military sphere and using them as ancillary methods of achieving military victory.⁶⁴

But what does this actually mean in reality? In the most basic terms it describes the methods whereby an intervening power – generally lacking the resources or will to engage in long-term, full-blown occupation of a territory and its peoples – tries to create the necessary political conditions that will allow it to achieve direct or indirect control of that society.⁶⁵ The very nature of this endeavour dictates that this is where military action now becomes genuinely ‘political’ in nature. Warfare now has the tendency to depart from the usual binary contest of one side versus another and is instead transformed into an environment whereby the intervening actor is confronted by multiple and diverse actors and audiences, each important in their own way but each potentially motivated by contradictory/competing perceptions, perspectives and allegiances, and all with varying ideas of what ‘success’ or ‘victory’ means to them. The military actor is now required to identify specific targets from among this kaleidoscope; to appeal to certain powerful elements for their support; to build alliances; to separate opponents from their support base; to influence key constituencies and actors; to engineer forms of direct and indirect control for the purpose of strengthening and supporting chosen clients; and ultimately to use all of these tricks to ensure the realisation of desired strategic objectives. As Simpson notes, the battlespace now becomes a sort of patchwork quilt whereby violent and non-violent forms of action are required to mix uneasily and military and political activity become largely indistinguishable from one another.⁶⁶

This is where the supposed importance of ‘understanding’ comes in. This form of armed politics by its very nature involves significant interaction with various components of the socio-political fabric of the host society: ordinary civilians, government actors, religious figureheads, political opportunists, tribal leaders, sectarian groupings and so on. This interaction and the attempted manipulations that often follow point us toward some of the specific characteristics that militaries use when engaging in political warfare. It is generally at this point that military or government actors quickly move to control the population so as to better ensure their desired political outcomes. Alongside the use of force, certain other behaviours are adopted, usually a mix of psychological operations, economic incentives, key-leader engagement, civic-action initiatives, and population control measures, all of which are designed to compel the population to submit and for chosen agents and clients to prosper. And the quest for cultural and socio-political understanding, particularly the beliefs, norms, identity and social organisation of those

that are the subject of these influence and control measures, becomes a fundamental component of that process.

But as this book argues, such behaviours rarely help deliver success. Instead they raise a series of worrying observations: Firstly the belief that detailed local understanding can be acquired in an accurate and timely fashion, that it can be successfully instrumentalised in the pursuit of military and political objectives and that the outcomes achieved will somehow possess an inherent durability. Secondly the notion that this entire process is somehow unaffected by war's inherent tendency toward unpredictability and counterintuitive outcomes. Thirdly, a seemingly all-pervasive faith that military officers, although confronted with problems that are by nature as much political as they are military, are somehow innately equipped to function within an unfamiliar conceptual space that sits at odds with their professional self-identity and deeply entrenched belief systems. And lastly a temptation to understand political warfare as essentially still part of a familiar Clausewitzian paradigm, a misapprehension that results in intervening actors getting sucked into long drawn-out conflicts, of whose nature they are unaware and in whose prosecution they are unskilled.⁶⁷ Thus the five case studies that comprise this book are not simply examples of historic COIN or stabilisation operations. Instead they have been chosen as instances of a particular brand of military endeavour, one that sought to use the power and influence of the intervening actor to effect significant forms of political and social change within target societies. In each, the drive for more and better forms of 'understanding' was not simply an attempt to pursue a more thoughtful and less kinetic approach to defeating an insurgency or building a government, but also a would-be aid to the use of military power in pursuit of the violent establishment of political influence or control over a target society. The question as to why in each instance that experiment failed is the subject of this book.

Looking Forward

Despite its official termination in 2014, the Human Terrain System lives on in the form of the Global Cultural Knowledge Network (GCKN), an organisation that sits within the G2 (intelligence) function of the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), under whose auspices the HTS originally emerged in 2006.⁶⁸ The GCKN is tasked to provide sociocultural analysis support to any unit deployed, or preparing to deploy, to an exercise or operation in the assigned region of responsibility of the unit being supported [and] make recommendations or support policy or doctrine development to increase the social science

expertise of DA military and civilian personnel'.⁶⁹ Thus the need/desire for socio-cultural intelligence in support of expeditionary military operations still appears to remain a strong influence in the collective psyche of the American military. Yet as the preceding debate has shown, the arguments put forward by the 'culture' advocates, doctrine writers and big data proponents draw to our attention various points of interest with respect to the interrelationship between socio-cultural 'understanding', the field of COIN/Stabilisation/Pacification, and the practice of political warfare. First and foremost is the seductive belief that societies very different to our own can be easily understood by those engaged on our behalf; an assumption that will be questioned repeatedly and in detail throughout this book. Second is the notion that these forms of understanding should be instrumental in design, i.e. that in conjunction with additional levers of power and influence they be utilised as a tool by which conditions can be manipulated to one's advantage. Third is the frequent emphasis upon the technical means of gathering and interpreting information, and lastly there is the general focus upon the tactical and operational levels of war and which ignores in large part the actual nature of war.

These assumptions and priorities are not entirely illegitimate, but they raise obvious questions, in particular about the way in which intervening military actors and supporting elements seek to instrumentalise their 'understanding'. The apparent ease with which they believe they can gather that understanding in the first place is problematic enough, an attitude encouraged by certain of those who sought to promise the military things that simply could not be delivered. As Simon notes with reference to the influx of numerous social scientists into the orbit of the military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan:

How many culture brokers said to their sponsors in DoD; don't be ridiculous; to even think that Soldiers and Marines can meaningfully tribally engage means they better be totally familiar with local history; for that, they better be able to pay close attention to everyone's competing stories; while for that, they better make sure they understand who's who, and who did what to whom in everything from prison cells two years ago to villages 200 years ago, and even that might not be sufficient.⁷⁰

From that basic difficulty of gathering understanding comes the even bigger issue of how to actually use it in a functional capacity that leads to an increased control of the operating environment, as demanded by doctrine. This is problematic in a very basic sense. An Afghan or frontier tribe, an Algerian or Vietnamese village, an Iraqi city; these are complex systems. Unpredictable, adaptive and non-linear in their response to

external stimuli, they present a deeply problematic scenario for those who believe that their interaction with such things can easily produce the desired outcomes.⁷¹ As for the increasingly technological dimension to the debate, until we properly understand the implications of still relatively nascent artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, any improvement in the mechanics of gathering and visualising data must recognise a reliance upon human interpretation in order to make our understanding of that data work to our advantage. And the problem is not simply a modern-day one. The mapping of tribal networks may now be carried out by algorithm, but the result is little different in reality to that achieved by colonial actors over a century ago who applied their own forms of 'systems analysis' to the very same issues faced. But then, as now, the problems were human, not technical. Did a structural or graphic understanding of local society provide true insight into the needs, wants and desires of its people? How did such knowledge relate to the objectives at play? How did one make the often powerfully divergent interests of local and external actors match?

As for the final point of interest, i.e. that of the tactical and operational focus, this appears to come at the expense of any really thoughtful consideration of some big and important questions. Does COIN or stabilisation even work? What gives us the right to interfere with and radically alter another's political systems and societal values? Whose interests are we really acting in, and whose interests matter most? And how do we expect to control the emergence of desired outcomes in the midst of the chaos and unpredictability that is war? This is reflective of perhaps the most important lacuna in the 'cultural' and 'informational' debate. As one former HTT member in Iraq reminisced, 'It wasn't about informing high-level decision-making.'⁷² Indeed, in that respect all the important decisions had already been made. And therein lies the rub. How does this capability to 'understand', realistically, inform the course of events? There remain vast, aching gaps in explaining how to translate such understanding into strategic success. HTTs may have been able to provide useful information that allowed commanders to reduce frictions or identify who among the local population had power or resources, but they appeared incapable of providing deep insight as to the likely behaviours and decision-making of those key actors in any strategic sense. Similarly, data can persuasively inform 'constructive local interventions' that ease tensions among a local Iraqi militia, for example, or ensure that the economic benefits of small-scale development projects feed accurately into key segments of the local population in Irbil. But it could never have provided any meaningful advice on how in 2011, with the

withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, that country's Shia-dominated government might be encouraged to properly cater for the wants, fears and concerns of its restless Sunni population.⁷³ Moreover, the use of cultural intelligence as an aid to tactical proficiency in these sorts of operations risks prolonging the misery of failed intervention. In Afghanistan for example it could be argued that the coalition's desired strategic objective of a modern, democratised society was always destined to fail. But as COIN techniques were relentlessly refined and improved upon with the help of initiatives such as the HTS, and as each tactical engagement was won, there emerged the logical but misleading belief that such methods could genuinely deliver what the strategists sought. Of course they couldn't, and even as tactical methods were gradually perfected, the campaign simply degenerated even further into a profitless, directionless endeavour that, courtesy of the blood and treasure hitherto expended, the American and British governments felt unable to step away from.

Ultimately, as this book argues, the focus on matters such as socio-cultural knowledge, human terrain and big data risks obscuring fundamental questions. When asked what coalition forces had got wrong in Afghanistan and Iraq, General Stanley McChrystal's response was simple: 'In both cases we didn't understand the problem or our objectives.'⁷⁴ Rather than the lack of social scientists or algorithms on hand to advise military commanders, the problem was a lack of far more fundamental questions being asked by the right people: What are the objectives of this war? How will military power provide the solution to the problems identified? What are the limits of our interests?⁷⁵ Viewed in this light, Arab concepts of time, of 'fatalism' versus 'mastery', of 'power distance' and the importance of 'contextual' language can all be acknowledged as important in their own way, but simply nowhere near as important as the calculus as to whether Iraq or Afghanistan could be forcibly transformed into a democracy or not.⁷⁶ McChrystal's admission thus reinforces a fundamental point: that the key forms of understanding that matter before all others are not local culture or local politics, but the nature of the fight, and whether the objectives at play are legitimate, understood at all levels, and ultimately achievable with the resources at hand.

This book seeks to explore many of these issues and contradictions, and what they mean for practitioners engaged in the complex business of COIN, stabilisation and irregular warfare and for whom the business of 'understanding' has become a serious matter. In that sense this is not intended to be a study of the HTS, or of military anthropology more generally. Nor, importantly, does it seek in any way to deride or

disparage those engaged in such activities. Instead in the spirit of Anson and Barkawi it seeks to explore the matter of what actually happens when '[p]ower puts knowledge to use in times of war'.⁷⁷ In particular it seeks to encourage greater recognition of the fundamental importance of history, and historical thinking, as a key component informing that debate. It argues that this importance presents itself in two ways. The first is the basic value of long-term analysis. By examining the way in which Western powers have sought to instrumentalise various forms of knowledge in the service of imperial conquest, Cold War counterinsurgency and more recent nation-building efforts over the course of a century and a half, it provides evidence of consistent, deep-lying and recurring pathologies that will continue to render these sorts of endeavours so problematic. But thinking historically also allows us to consider the question of 'understanding' – and specifically its role in war – in a way that is fundamental to effective intellectual inquiry. John Lewis Gaddis argues that true historical analysis centres upon recognising the way in which events are determined by the interdependence of variables, the chaos and complexity that defines the interplay of those variables, and the difficulty of explaining causation in terms of the results of that interplay.⁷⁸ It is, as Gaddis describes it, an 'ecological' method of analysis that sits in opposition to social science's tendency toward reductionism, i.e. the search for that element whose inclusion in or removal from a causal chain explains the outcome. The matter of cultural understanding in war has too often been examined in this light, as one single variable artificially divorced from the range of other variables that interact so unpredictably with each other in such situations.⁷⁹

So what, ultimately, does this study argue? In the broadest sense it argues that the call for greater cultural or socio-political understanding in the service of COIN and stabilisation-type activities is a distraction from a far more important consideration. It proposes that in reality all the cultural 'turn' has accomplished is lead to a tendency to elide the demands of conventional Clausewitzian war with the very different demands of political warfare. Human terrain teams, cultural understanding, 'effects-based operations', population-centric COIN, stabilisation theory; none of these really equips or prepares practitioners for the most important thing, namely the very differing demands of them when warfare is used not simply to create the terms for political victory but instead as a form of politics *in and of itself*. Technologically advanced professional militaries trained and configured to achieve conventional military victories remain encouraged to believe that with the addition of a few new doctrines or capabilities they can easily cope with something that looks

on the surface to be quite familiar and which accords with their preferences. But what they are faced with in reality is often something entirely different: a type of conflict in which they find themselves interacting with phenomena that they rarely comprehend, often rarely even see, which they struggle to exert any meaningful control over, and all in pursuit of a victory that might literally mean nothing.

2 Themes and Issues

Why interventions such as Vietnam or Afghanistan fail to achieve their objectives is naturally a consequence of a vast range of factors. Ideology, psychology, strategy, policy, resources and timing matter hugely. As does the enemy's own agency of course. But in addition to such weighty matters sits the perennial question of whether the external actors in each case truly understood enough of the countries and societies that they were intervening in to give their designs the maximum prospect of success. To that end, this book examines five particular case studies: The British on the North-West Frontier 1919–39, the French campaign in Algeria 1954–62, the US pacification campaign in Vietnam 1966–72, and US-led coalition operations in Iraq 2003–11, and Afghanistan 2001–present. In the context of the themes and issues highlighted so far, these examples are intended to provoke deeper thinking about the way in which forms of knowledge and understanding are brought to bear upon the process of armed intervention.

Case Study 1: North-West Frontier, 1919–39

The first of the case studies is the British experience on the North-West Frontier of India during the interwar period. This allows an assessment of 'local' understanding as a useful facilitator for effective population control by external actors. It also tests the concept that the colonial era provides us with the paradigm of the highly knowledgeable soldier/administrator possessed of a depth of knowledge and familiarity with local society that stands in contrast to modern counterinsurgents and their time-limited rotational tours of duty. In this respect it uses as its focal point a specific organisation: the Indian Political Service (IPS) and its cadre of tribal administrators based within the fractious North-West Frontier Province of India, whose task in concert with the Indian Army (and eventually the Royal Air Force) was to pacify and contain the Pashtun tribes of that region. The interwar period presents us with an organisation that, courtesy by that point of nearly five decades' exposure

to the region and its peoples and staffed throughout by highly experienced personnel, had become a reference point for institutional expertise in the field of tribal administration. But whether that supposed expertise was sufficient for the nature of the task at hand and whether it could compensate for the very different forms of control advocated by powerful military partners who saw the interaction between government and tribe in very different terms, is open to question. So too the hugely important matter of whether its knowledge and expertise on the matter of tribal affairs was able to positively influence the Government of India's policy in relation to the Frontier. Perhaps most important, however, are two specific aspects of the British/Pashtun encounter. Firstly the way in which those specialists who were placed in close proximity to indigenous society displayed a tendency to try to adjust and manipulate that society for their own ideological ends. And perhaps even more revealing, the way in which their methods in this respect were frequently manipulated in return by those that they sought to control and almost inevitably turned to the latter's own advantage.

Case Study 2: The War in Algeria, 1954–62

The second case study is the French experience in Algeria from 1954 to 1962. In some ways this continues the narrative explored by the British experience on the Frontier, dealing as it does with the activities of an organisation devoted to operating amongst the native population of a colonial territory in order to provide a mechanism for their control by government. In this case it was the Section Administrative Spécialisée (SAS), formed in 1955 for the purpose of lending greater emphasis to the French 'political' campaign against the fight by the Front Libération Nationale (FLN) for an independent Algeria.¹ This case study centres upon the formation and employment of the SAS and the methods that it used to try to provide the French regime with some sort of 'enlightened' political purchase among the rural and semi-urban Algerian population. In large part the case study focuses upon three particular dimensions of the SAS experience during the campaign. The first of these were the oft-counterintuitive consequences that accrued from SAS attempts to build political influence among ordinary Algerians and the practical difficulty of engineering more than just physical proximity to the local population. The second dimension was the extent to which the civil–military divide constantly weakened SAS efforts. Throughout much of the war in Algeria the French military – partners in the pacification campaign – sought to wilfully misinterpret the nature of the insurgency. Partly as an ideological legacy of the then-recent experience in Indochina, partly due

to the apparent efficacy of their brutal actions and partly because of a number of powerful institutional interests, they would pursue an increasingly violent and inflammatory approach to COIN in Algeria; so-called Revolutionary War. This would serve to thoroughly undermine the SAS rival 'hearts and minds' approach. But it was the third dimension that was perhaps the most problematic, namely the fundamental inability of the SAS to compensate for the almost complete illegitimacy of French designs. No matter the skill or otherwise of its operatives in engaging with the population and in implementing government directives, and notwithstanding the comprehensive *military* defeat of the insurgency by 1960, nothing could disguise the fundamental reality evident to every Algerian exposed to them; that the SAS actions were designed to cement colonial rule. In this respect, the 'political' side of the war could be waged, but never won.

Case Study 3: Vietnam, 1964–72

The third case study wields the concept of 'understanding' in a much more holistic sense, examining the concept from the strategic as well as operational and tactical perspectives. The focus is Vietnam's 'village war', a vast COIN effort jointly undertaken by the United States and the government of South Vietnam (GVN) and designed to help restore and advance the latter's political legitimacy throughout the South's rural hinterland. In its various forms the so-called pacification campaign would comprise one of the most ambitious uses of political and military action in combination with one another ever seen. Yet those engaged at ground level found that their actions consistently failed to translate into the objective sought, i.e. the creation of durable political support for the Government of Vietnam on the part of the South's rural population. This chapter will explore various explanations for that failure by examining the way in which the United States understood the concept of pacification in Vietnam. In particular it focuses on four dimensions to the debate. The first of these was the inability, from senior Washington DC policymakers, to its South Vietnamese regime clients, to its military civilian practitioners on the ground, to all agree to a common understanding of what pacification should actually mean in practice. The very breadth of the concept would simultaneously rob it of all meaning when placed in the hands of different actors. The second is a specific focus upon the US army, and its seemingly relentless determination to understand pacification as primarily a matter of the physical destruction of the enemy rather than a matter of politics. Although this was partly due to the standard argument of an army wired for conventional battle, there were also a

number of intellectual tensions guiding its actions. Competing notions as to the proper relationship between the physical destruction of the enemy and the winning of the political battle were compounded by the problematic influence of doctrine in influencing the US army's understanding of COIN and the general institutional reticence of the army to adopt a 'political' role in warfare. The third part of the argument focuses upon the inability of the United States government and Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) to develop amongst its ground-level advisors a level of local understanding as well as appropriate metrics that together would allow them to accurately measure the political progress being made by the pacification strategy. And lastly the chapter will examine whether the most serious weakness of all was in fact a fundamental lack of understanding of the very nature of war in Vietnam, a misapprehension that would reveal the fundamental uselessness of pacification as a suitable theory of action.

Case Study 4: Iraq: Al Anbar and Basra, 2006–9

The fourth case study concerns the invasion and occupation of Iraq by coalition forces in the period 2003–11. More precisely it examines the activities of American and British forces in Anbar Province and Basra respectively during the period 2006–9. These two locations would bear witness to military actors taking the lead in using a variety of 'political' actions in their attempts to secure their objectives. For the Americans this was the destruction of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in the latter's stronghold of Al Anbar. For the British it was the crafting of the necessary conditions to allow them a peaceful withdrawal from Iraq's second city. In both cases, coalition forces would be forced into ad hoc arrangements with local Iraqi actors who frequently spanned the divide between ally and enemy. Their respective experiences would not only illustrate the problems associated with reconciling local political conditions with stated operational and strategic objectives, but also illustrate just how fragile the ability of Western military actors in Iraq was when it came to controlling the processes unleashed by their own designs. For the Americans the measures taken to break the spine of the AQI insurgency in Anbar Province by way of their alliance with the so-called Awakening movement illustrated the US military's ability to navigate local politics for its own immediate ends. But it simultaneously illustrated the unpredictable consequences of such actions and the ultimately damaging consequences for Iraq as a whole further down the line. In Basra meanwhile the British policy of withdrawal from Iraq's second city would burden military commanders *in situ* with the responsibility of navigating

the Byzantine complexity of Iraqi politics in the South in an effort to create the political and security dynamics required to allow a handover to Iraqi government control and the extraction of British forces with military reputation intact. The first objective was secured, in a fashion. The second was not. And although the examples of Al Anbar and Basra might differ in this respect, together they illustrated how no matter the chosen method or the degree of local understanding achieved, the realisation of US and British objectives sat firmly at the mercy of powerful local actors with their own interests firmly to the fore.

Case Study 5: Afghanistan: Helmand Province, 2006–14

The final case study is that of British and American experience in Helmand, Afghanistan, in the period 2006–14. Like the Frontier, Algeria, Vietnam and Iraq, Afghanistan eventually became the site of a concerted knowledge-building exercise on the part of Western forces as they sought to comprehend an often bewilderingly complex operating environment. Consequently Anglo-US operations in Helmand would feature a concerted turn toward political warfare in their efforts to undermine and ultimately defeat the Taliban. Their methods would involve a heavy emphasis upon understanding, engaging and manipulating a variety of local actors as part of this objective. Consequently, and noting that commentators hold the lack of understanding in particular to be one of the significant reasons for coalition failure in Helmand and indeed Afghanistan as a whole, this final case study examines the extent to which the question of whether coalition forces properly understood their operating environment has been framed in the correct way. In particular it uses Colin F. Jackson's concept of the Military Operational Code (MOC) to explain how coalition military actors in Helmand during this period were affected less by their lack of local or environmental understanding than by other alternative forms of knowledge that were far more influential in shaping their actions. These centred upon their COIN doctrine and the realities that it presented; their powerful sense of self-identity as a warrior class; and the willingness of Anglo-US ground forces to interpret the demands of COIN in very specific ways that played to the strengths of technologically advanced militaries. These would be perhaps the most crucial ingredients in determining how coalition military actors 'understood' the problem of Helmand.

Themes

On the surface, these five campaigns deal with a fairly narrow line of argument, namely the various forms of understanding that guided the

actions of the intervening powers in each case. But together they provide evidence of a number of broader themes that emerge in the process of fighting the 'political' fight. So as well as its focus upon the way in which counterinsurgents sought to develop and instrumentalise knowledge in these five specific campaigns, this book also identifies a series of overarching themes that not only affected the outcome in each instance but which appear to shape endeavours of this sort more generally. The first of these is the very nature of the undertaking. Whatever form they took, be they termed COIN, pacification, stabilisation or nation-building, these case studies are examples of imperialism in action. This is less a political, ideological or moral standpoint than a simple matter of academic definition. With each of these encounters irrevocably shaped by the very nature of the classic 'imperial' encounter between strength and weakness, the innate pathologies of imperialism itself, specifically its liberal form, provide a sense of logic both to actions and resulting outcomes. Secondly there is the matter of the very nature of war itself. The tendency toward friction, interdependency and chance is only exaggerated when outsiders' designs are pitted against complex and reactive socio-political environments of the sorts encountered in each case study. Thirdly there is the matter of military doctrine and its ability to guide practitioners on how best to instrumentalise a form of warfare where military superiority counts for very little. And lastly there is the question of how military organisational culture and self-identity shapes military actors' perceptions of the operating environment, their understanding of the nature of the problems faced, and therefore the nature of their responses to those problems.

Theme 1: Imperialism

At the turn of the new millennium, the historian Douglas Porch pointed to an international environment that had, through the promotion (or attempted promotion) of 'superior' Western culture and values, witnessed a revival of imperialism; 'A softer, gentler version, shorn of its racist overtones, but imperialism nonetheless.'² For Porch, the parallels between the imperial age and the New World Order of the late 1990s were clear and obvious. Peace Support Operations (PSOs) and the subordinate activities of famine relief, arbitration, civic action and general nation-building might have caused modern military warriors to bemoan the distraction from traditional war-fighting, but such endeavours were simply 'business as usual' if viewed from the perspective of imperial activists. Within a short period of time his observations had been reinforced in an almost surreal fashion. By early 2003 Western forces

occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. Swift expeditionary operations now degenerated into prolonged pacification campaigns as Western powers sought to transform native societies into more palatable political entities according to their own moral and political preferences.

But although the historical parallels between imperial past and the post-9/11 era might seem self-evident to historians, the ability of history to provide informative reasoning became imperilled. Deprived of any real sense of detail or context, political leaders relied upon blunt and unhelpful forms of analogy in order to garner or sustain public support while their opponents did the same in order to challenge them.³ Where policy-makers, senior military commanders, and other commentators did attempt to acknowledge any historical context to affairs, that knowledge was often thin and incomplete. Others were simply uninterested.⁴ The imperial past found it difficult to get a proper hearing among those not historically educated. Not least because the tendency to understand the entire concept of imperialism by way of the traditional paradigm of a territorial-colonial 'empire' was a powerful disincentive to accept the premise that actions might indeed be 'imperial' in nature. It certainly contradicted the vision of those in Washington DC or Whitehall who saw their role in the world in a very different way, one that not only enhanced the security of their own nations but in the process delivered to others the sorts of freedoms and universal values desired by all peoples.⁵

Problematically for such arguments, even if physical 'Empires' are no more and even if the dominant world powers have little interest in acquiring them one can point to a modern economic and political landscape that is still recognizably 'imperial' in nature.⁶ Even in the twenty-first century, there remains an international system defined by a power relationship between strong and weak collectives, 'between politically, economically and culturally expanding and dominant core societies on one hand, and peripheral societies that are dependent upon them'.⁷ In this context the existence of physical colonies is irrelevant; imperialism is about dominance through either direct or indirect means and it is as much, if not more, a matter of ideas and values as anything else.⁸

In his essay *Ideologies of Empire* the political theorist Duncan Bell identifies three powerful factors (among others) that motivated the European imperialism of the period between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries.⁹ These were the 'commercial-exploitative', 'realist-geopolitical', and 'liberal-civilizational' impulses. The first relates to the economic benefits that accrue for the imperial power or certain specific interests within, i.e. financial institutions, corporations, conglomerates etc. Such justifications tended to focus on either the extraction of commodities or the opening of new markets for trade. The realist-geopolitical

impulse focused attention on power politics and the balancing of the power of other imperial states. The world was envisaged as a giant geopolitical chessboard, with geopolitical strategy a vital ingredient of ultimate success. Imperialism was therefore seen less as an end in itself than as a means to secure geopolitical advantage. Lastly, the liberal-civilisational justification maintained that liberal states have the right or even a duty to spread civilisation to the purportedly non-civilised; Empire was legitimate if it was primarily intended to benefit the populations subjected to it.

It is not difficult to immediately identify the relevance of these concepts to any discussion concerning invasion of Iraq in 2003, for example. Certainly, the influence of powerful economic actors in attempting to gain access to Iraqi oil, as well as the wider attempt to gain geopolitical advantage, is enough to convince many of the deeply imperial tone of the (primarily) American intervention there. The problem is that these alone are inherently reductive explanations for its actions in 2003.¹⁰ What underpinned it all was the influence at that moment in time of a neoconservative ideology, rooted in the political creed of liberalism, that advocated democratising Iraq and encouraging the spread of Western values throughout the Middle East.¹¹ Economic interests mattered, but as even the Marxist historian Victor Kiernan noted when it came to understanding historic European imperialism, 'A society as complex as Europe's could not forever be content with crude spoliation. Other better motives had to be felt.' Such a statement might similarly apply to the United States of the early twenty-first century.¹² Thus although we may not speak of the 'civilising mission' so central to the ideology of Anglo-French imperial conquest of the nineteenth century, the terminology of 'modernisation', 'democratisation' and 'development' retains the same fundamental conceit; namely a status that the West has achieved and that others must reach and be assisted in doing so, by force if necessary.¹³ This 'liberal-civilisational' impulse best explains Western engagements in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan, or at least explains them better than the oft-repeated trope of fighting wars for oil or other commodities. These interventions were, at heart, a manifestation of an ideology rooted in the notion that liberal states had (and still have) the right or even the duty to spread civilised values to the 'non-civilised'.¹⁴ Particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, such evocative language was a recurring feature of political and public discourse. The debates and justifications deployed in order to support interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya (and potentially Syria) were often couched in the language of the universalist human values championed by the West – individual freedoms, political plurality, human rights, free trade and the rule of law – which in turn were drawn

directly from the political ideology of British, French and American imperial expansion during the nineteenth century.¹⁵

With these broader commonalities in mind, the imperial analogy has legs. Both as a process and a philosophy it offers a series of persistent, durable observations relating to the dynamics of conquest by the strong against the weak. These include the very rationale of the imperial agenda and its relationship to the politics of the homeland; the complex and reactive nature of native societies and peoples encountered; and the imperial-era preference toward a positivist, quasi-scientific approach to the business of influence and control. Of relevance too is the way in which empires sought to conceptualise unknown spaces and, in their attempts to conquer and control such spaces, attempted to simplify highly complex forms of understandings for the purpose of policy, thus converting knowledge into a form of 'policy science'. There was also the growth of knowledge communities, i.e. those networks of 'experts' who sought to help the state identify its interests and thus frame the issues for collective debate, but who often reduced very complex problems to simple matters of cause and effect – no different in many ways to the various political think tanks circling government in the United States in particular.¹⁶ But the imperial past offers much to think about in a concrete sense too, insofar as the process of imperial conquest and rule provides, in a sense, the closest thing we have to a set of fixed rules when it comes to assessing the likely consequences of trying to change 'lesser' societies by force. These aren't prescriptive by any means; they do not apply equally to every example of liberal intervention nor with equal weight to the specific case studies in this book. But what is evident is the way that by and large, individually or collectively, these 'rules' offer recurring and important considerations that not only can't be ignored, but which help to actively explain why the process of armed liberal intervention is so problematic.

The first rule might be termed 'The Inevitability of Resistance'. The historian Antoinette Burton argues that most writings on the subject of imperial conquest tend to approach the subject from back to front.¹⁷ Rather than the territorial extension and hegemony which is the traditional image of the imperial era, she argues the imperial experience was in reality defined by the degree of resistance and obstruction that it faced. The supposed military, economic and political dominance of the imperial power was, in reality, under continual challenge. The erroneous presumption of the basic stability of imperial power and authority therefore lends a false narrative to understandings of imperialism, underestimating the tenuous hold it had on its subjects.¹⁸ In truth, states Burton, the fundamental trait of Empire was not its strength, but its perpetual

insecurity. Of course, Burton's argument can be (and is) subject to rigorous dispute by other historians but the point is a valuable one. It reminds us that those subject to imperial conquest and rule almost uniformly refused to simply concede in the face of military and political onslaught. The point can be illustrated by listing a fraction of the wars fought by the British Empire against indigenous elements over a mere five-decade period; the First Afghan and First Opium Wars (both 1838–42), the Indian Mutiny and the Second Opium War (both 1857), the Maori wars (1845–72), the Anglo-Zulu war (1879), the Second Afghan War (1878–80), the various Anglo-Ashanti conflicts (1824–1901), the First and Second Anglo-Boer wars (1880–1 and 1899–1902 respectively), the North-West Frontier revolt of 1897; the list goes on. Most of these contests were won but even then they often featured significant reverses or embarrassments. In other words, British supremacy was continually open to dispute.¹⁹ For the French, American, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Belgian and Dutch as well as a host of non-Western actors, violent opposition to Empire's various modes of intrusion was, if not necessarily existential in nature, still a constant, expensive and distracting feature of the imperial experience. By understanding the urge of those subject to imperial domination to resist the imposition of alien political/military authority, there is a requirement to recalibrate our understanding of the ease (or rather lack thereof) with which hegemonic powers have historically managed the task of securing their 'troubled terrains'.²⁰

The second factor is what might be identified as the inherent hypocrisies of the imperial endeavour. From the European imperial project sprang an inherent and familiar tension: on the one hand the conviction that one's values are universal and desirable and on the other hand the forceful and frequently unpleasant actions required to encourage their spread. By choosing to impose themselves in regions unused or unsuited to such concepts, liberal ideals became hostage to the contradictions inherent in trying to make them work. From the beginning in 1837, the French in Algeria were propelled by the powerful motive force of their own revolution, the slogan of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and the central ideology of assimilation whereby native Algerians would be given the opportunity to become Frenchmen and thus enjoy and embody French values. However, the French would be forced to encourage the spread of those values by killing on a vast scale. Even by the 1960s, after over a century of occupation, Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers* gave us the image of liberty, equality and fraternity being dispensed by way of a blowtorch being run across the body of an unconscious Algerian suspect by his French army interrogator. In Indochina, as Alice Conklin notes,

the inherent tensions between imperialism and republicanism dictated that the notion of fraternity meant, in reality, leading natives to civilisation by force if necessary. She quotes one French colonial governor as admitting, 'For a long time yet, it will thus be necessary for our subjects to be brought to progress against their will.'²¹ In Vietnam, enlightened liberal democratic ideals were twisted by context and circumstance to such a degree that their advocates found themselves accepting the need to destroy a village in order to save it.²² In Afghanistan since 2001 the images may have been less brutal, but the story just as problematic. In order to generate initial and continued domestic support for the intervention, much was made by America and Britain of their enlightened intentions: a strong, central and democratically elected Afghan government, the emancipation of women, the elimination of corruption and so forth. Unfortunately coalition forces came to understand that Afghanistan was a place where a corrupt and murderous paedophile might in fact be the most suitable appointment as local chief of police; where the continued cultivation of drugs was tactically desirable; and where Western governments speaking the mantra of women's rights sought to maintain the authority of an Afghan government that had chosen to legalise rape. Disturbed by the evident contradictions emerging in front of their eyes, public and domestic political support for the mission rapidly dwindled. These are typical of the perils of intervening on the advertised basis of one's enlightened values.²³

The third factor was domestic opposition to the imperial agenda. Resistance did not just occur in those sites where it imposed itself. Much of the most influential and vocal anti-imperialist sentiment stemmed from domestic elements, both public and political.²⁴ Just like the disillusionment provoked by the 2003/4 events at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq for example, the systematic use of violence by French forces in Algeria during the nineteenth century, the severe occupation of Kabul by Roberts's 'Army of Retribution' in 1879–80, the large-scale system of concentration pursued by Lord Kitchener against Boer civilians in South Africa (1900–2), all raised an outcry among influential segments of the domestic press, populations and opposition political parties. Throughout the Philippines campaign of 1899–1902, the US military was subjected to sustained media attack over its role as an imperial force, its abuses shocking an American public convinced that its soldiers should be representatives of enlightened American values. These examples illustrated the vocal and often sizeable elements within European and American society that did not fit the stereotype of instinctive advocates of imperialism, who disputed the actions carried out in their name, and who worried

at the corrosive effect of imperialism on the politics and society of the home base.

The fourth factor is what might be described as the fantasy of the 'transformative light touch'. As Duncan Bell describes, one of the fundamental decisions taken by the imperial powers was whether their intended project should be 'indirect' or 'totalizing' in nature.²⁵ In other words, would control function by way of limited ambition and expenditure and with local power structures and social systems maintained relatively intact? Or was it to be a thorough transformation of the target society according to certain political and ideological preferences? The former offered a less ambitious form of control at lower costs by way of delegating responsibility for political rule to local leaders, while the latter offered the prospect of tighter control but at a far heightened human and financial cost. Although these distinctions tend to disguise the fact that the two systems often intermingled in practice, history shows that if the imperial power intended to oversee fundamental changes in the social and political state of colonised territories, and if it wished to advance progressive ideals, then this required as its corollary the 'totalizing' transplant of metropolitan beliefs, cultures and values onto what were in effect deeply alien societies. And despite fervent belief in the universality of the principles at hand, the resources required to make such radical changes work were vast in scale. Indeed, in the case of France it demanded a wholesale spiritual and political commitment to realising its particular vision of Empire, one that was designed to draw in political, intellectual and military elites, ordinary citizens, and both colonisers and colonised as part of one giant effort.²⁶ The point is clear. The genuine transformational change of conquered territories according to one's imperial vision required a significant temporal commitment, a heavy physical footprint on the ground, a national effort at home, and acceptance of that vision on the part of those subject to it. None of this could be accomplished by temporary occupations or by simply exercising authority and influence through local political actors, a process that usually tended to crystallise existing political arrangements. Attempts to limit one's exposure to risk generally limited the ability to dictate one's interests beyond a certain point.

The fifth factor at play is the problem of 'noble' yet ultimately destructive ideals. Any advocate of the spread of broadly liberal political values must not only address the morality of imposing one's own forms of 'civilisation' upon others but also answer the fundamental question of whether the imposition of such values can avoid causing deeply negative consequences. These often-blatant efforts at social, political and economic engineering encourage a tendency to see local populations as inert

masses – objects rather than as political subjects – causing so-called reformers to act indifferently to forms of local knowledge. When this is compounded by what some describe as the wider vices of imperial rule, namely unaccountability on the part of the imperial actor to those subject to its power, and the impact on local societies of policies driven by distant strategic concerns or economic interests rooted elsewhere, the results were and are frequently catastrophic for those local societies. Samuel Huntington noted in 1967, after witnessing at first hand the effects of the policy of modernisation upon the social fabric of urban Vietnam, that the United States was in danger of accomplishing in a fraction of the time what it would take twenty years for the Vietcong to do.²⁷ Modern Iraq is an example of the more current incarnation of these problems where, as Jennifer Pitts states, a combination of overwhelming and unaccountable power, opportunism by private interests and corporations, and abysmal planning caused by inattention and indifference resulted in a disastrous example of imperialism in action, the echoes of which continue to reverberate loudly to this day.²⁸

The final factor is the problem of what Dierk Walter terms ‘warfare on the periphery’, where conflict is not only geographically peripheral but metaphorically so in respect to the attention and resources that the metropole is willing to devote to it.²⁹ So in the competition for resources the material requirements and political attention that might possibly end these ‘small wars’ relatively quickly were (and still often are) absent. This lack of resources then places a huge premium on the requirement for the intervening power to mobilise local elites; a form of cooperation that is vital in allowing the control of vast amounts of space with relatively small numbers of its own soldiers and administrators. This form of local collaboration, a mainstay of the imperial era, remains a fundamental aspect in the prosecution of political warfare. No matter the weight of technological advantage and military prowess on the part of the intervening power, the nature of these conflicts still demands a heavy reliance upon effective local collaboration. But if – as they nearly always are – these conflicts are also by their nature civil wars fought as much for local reasons as anything else, then the objectives and preferences of the external actor have to take their place against the objectives and preferences of those fighting their own localised conflict. And the former will nearly always come a distant second in that respect.³⁰

Theme 2: The Nature of War

The second theme is one that persists throughout this book in a largely hidden fashion. In broad terms it might loosely be described as the sorts

of frictions that attend any attempt to achieve political objectives through force of arms. More accurately it is that specific thing; the very nature of war. And while the incorporation of theory into the debate raises the spectre of abstract and obscure philosophical meanderings, in reality it provides a useful framework for understanding and interpreting the way in which events unfold. As stated in the previous chapter, when COIN, stabilisation and pacification operations assume the dimension of political warfare they depart quite distinctly from the traditional paradigm of a contest between two sides (be they individual powers or alliances) where military action paves the way for politics to construct desired outcomes. But what they don't escape are the basic Clausewitzian characteristics of war *itself*. In that sense they remain captive to the notion of 'friction', namely the problems that attend any large-scale human endeavour that, in the midst of violence and confusion, pits myriad complex, interdependent variables against one another.³¹ They also observe the Clausewitzian reality of war's nature; not in the 'ideal' sense that war is a continuation of policy by other means but in the real sense that war exercises a relentless tendency to try to escape the confines of rational, bureaucratic control.³² These limited COIN or stabilisation operations are therefore still part of that constant struggle between the guiding forces of human design and a phenomenon that tends towards chaos, unpredictability and, potentially, escalation. Clausewitz and others provide serious food for thought for those who would like to think of war as if it were something on a leash, naturally subservient to the demands of policymakers and generals.

There are other complicating factors. Much of the problem facing any practitioner contemplating the use of military power for political effect lies with what the strategic theorist Edward Luttwak identified as war's inherent lack of 'causal harmony'. Luttwak's point was that positive achievements at the tactical or operational levels of war might translate directly, or have quite the opposite effect, or even remain without consequence when it came to matters of grand strategy.³³ In other words there is no straight line of 'success' stretching from the tactical level upward. Identifying this contradiction and the consequent lack of logic that frequently characterises outcomes in war, Luttwak asks important questions as to how we imagine events should relate to each other. Because if there is no natural causal harmony between the levels of war then we have to question the extent to which military operations can consistently control the emergence of desired outcomes. The implications are clear and obvious but bear repetition: activity at the tactical and operational levels of war, no matter how well informed, has an inherently unpredictable relationship with the successful attainment of one's ultimate

strategic objectives. War, be it conventional or political, can easily offer a state of affairs where actors are often deprived of any intuitive understanding of the relationship between their actions and the outcomes that emerge.³⁴

Recognition of these frictional aspects of war-making is both troubling and illuminating. Troubling in that it obviously asks very difficult questions of the way that we seek to use military power to achieve chosen aims. If the disruptive characteristics inherent to war can impose obstacles even in pursuit of seemingly straightforward military objectives, i.e. defeating an opponent in conventional battle, one can imagine how those difficulties are magnified when force is utilised as an instrument of positive change among highly complex social systems. But it is also illuminating, in that it provides us the ability to more properly understand the challenge of employing such forms of power as an accurate instrument of political intent.³⁵ Recognition of these complexities is the reason why theory lends an important voice to the debate. It's what allows us to recognise the true nature of the backdrop against which our actions play out. In conjunction with historical detail, it allows a degree of firm reality to be brought to bear upon the debate in terms of understanding the deeper causes of success or failure.

Theme 3: The Power of Doctrine

The third powerful theme to emerge over the course of this study is the problems associated with military doctrine, what the American political scientist Austin Long describes as the 'soul of armies'.³⁶ In order to provide a route through the chaos and complexity of war across its various levels, militaries create and codify their own systems of knowledge and understanding in the guise of various manuals of war. These doctrinal publications, some of which translate across service and national boundaries, provide a common approach to all manner of military activities. But once above the tactical or instructional level, they tend to share one defining characteristic, namely taking matters of tremendous and even potentially insoluble complexity and translating them into a series of clear principles and observations. The reason is obvious: such forms of simplified understanding provide the basis upon which military actors can trust those around them to adhere to the same fundamental principles and methods. In so doing they serve to create both an understanding of the world and an understanding of how to act in that world. But by allowing militaries to shape their own understanding of the world around them, they similarly shape their understanding of how to act in that world.³⁷

These actions, in the context of political warfare, are of huge interest. Samuel Huntingdon and Harold D. Lasswell observed that modern militaries are experts in ‘the management of violence’.³⁸ Their use of words signifies that military expertise, like that of any other profession, is focused within narrow parameters which encourage tremendous proficiency within those confines. The natural corollary, however, is that such expertise should not be expected to cross easily into other domains. The problem with COIN in particular is the requirement for it to do precisely that. Experts in the application of violence are expected to become experts in the applications of all the other *non-violent* techniques that supposedly make up effective COIN. The political scientist Wendy Brown highlights the problem. Pointing to the ambitious prescriptions for COIN success demanded by FM 3-24, Brown observed that soldiers and marines appeared to require

[a] degree of political intelligence and foresight worthy of Rousseau’s Lawgiver, a degree of provision for human needs worthy of the farthest reach of the communist imaginary, a degree of stabilization through governance worthy of Thomas Hobbes or perhaps Immanuel Kant, an ability to “decipher cultural narratives” (the manual’s words) worthy of a trained ethnographer, and an ability to manipulate these narratives worthy of Plato. It also entails the paradox of fostering the strength and legitimacy of what are often puppet regimes, and doing so while the occupiers are still on site. And all of this in a milieu of upheaval, violence, and complexly riven societies with weak or non-existent states.³⁹

Yet American doctrine is not alone in its ambitions, as this description by the British army’s General Sir Nicholas Carter of the then (2015) emergent doctrine of ‘integrated action’ shows:

What our doctrine of Integrated Action seeks to do is once you’ve identified the outcome that you’re seeking to achieve, you then go through a process of analysing the audiences that are relevant to the attainment of that objective, whether they’re actors, allies or adversaries. You then take a view on what effect you need to achieve on those various actors. Then you look into your locker of methodologies, which will arrange all things from soft through to hard power, and you work out the best method of synchronizing and orchestrating those range of effects to impart effect onto audience, to achieve the outcome.⁴⁰

‘Integrated action’ appears sixty-eight times in the British army’s 2017 Land doctrine, underlining its central importance to modern British military thought. The concept is in many ways an entirely appropriate and indeed elevated intellectual response to the myriad permutations of the modern battlefield. It provides its readers with an awareness of the sorts of actors that the modern military actor needs to take into consideration. But Carter’s description is problematic. In the first

instance it requires the identification of an outcome. But as General Stanley McChrystal, senior commander in Iraq and commander ISAF forces in Afghanistan 2009–10, subsequently admitted in relation to both campaigns, there was no agreed outcome, no understanding of what the objective actually was. In other words, military commanders have to be comfortable with the fact that the outcome may be effectively unstated, or entirely at the mercy of events. Even should an objective be stated or identified, it does not automatically follow that it be either suitable or feasible. Secondly, the doctrine requires commanders to “[a]nalyse the audiences”, calculate “effect” upon them, and then co-ordinate and synchronize a range of methodologies to achieve that effect and thus secure the desired outcome’. In this instance, not only are the problems not difficult to identify, they are myriad. Allies may have divergent objectives and may also in the case of indigenous political actors swiftly become enemies once their interests dictate the prudence of such a switch. Meanwhile adversaries may be fluid or effectively untouchable, as the Iranians were in respect to their interference in southern Iraq during coalition operations there. In addition, the doctrine presumes the ability to deploy a cross-governmental approach that is in reality unlikely to work satisfactorily in practice. Such problems were a paralysing feature of the British campaign in Iraq and, although Whitehall’s performance was subject to an excoriating review in the form of the subsequent Chilcott Enquiry, there is no reason to believe that interdepartmental frictions, institutional inertia, lack of resourcing and basic uninterest on the part of key actors wouldn’t be a feature of any similar intervention in the future. And lastly the entire tone of Integrated Action suggests the ability to achieve a heightened level of control across a field of activity where, as one commentator puts it, ‘everything is connected to everything’.⁴¹ It encourages a belief in the straightforward calculation and delivery of ‘effect’ and reinforces the seductive notion of straight-line dynamics in COIN, a state of affairs highly unlikely to exist in the sorts of complex scenarios that the doctrine of integrated action is designed to address.⁴²

Associated doctrines attract similar queries. Take the British JDP 05, which serves as British stabilisation doctrine. It describes the concept in the following terms:

[O]ne of the approaches used in situations of violent conflict which is designed to protect and promote legitimate political authority, using a combination of integrated civilian and military actions to reduce violence, re-establish security and prepare for longer-term recovery by building an enabling environment for structural stability.⁴³

But what does this mean in reality? As Emile Simpson points out, ‘stabilised’ is simply a status, and one moreover that lies open to broad

interpretation.⁴⁴ Language such as 'legitimate political authority' and 're-establish security' provides little in the way of strategic guidance to actors engaged in the stabilising process. These conditions might best be embodied or delivered by democratic, representative means but they might similarly be secured by thoroughly violent, anti-democratic elements. Similarly the provision of 'structural stability' might best be secured through repressive social practices or traditional yet highly corrupt patron-client or kin relationships. And ultimately stabilisation means different things to different actors engaged in the same process. NATO doctrine explicitly links stabilisation with reconstruction, whereas UK doctrine does not. The United States in turn views stabilisation as being a subset of COIN, whereas UK doctrine views the relationship in entirely the opposite terms.⁴⁵

The assumptions underpinning FM 3-24, Integrated Action or stabilisation doctrine are important because they ask questions about the intellectual processes and assumptions underwriting modern military thinking. Taking just the first publication as an example, Douglas Porch is highly critical of its reliance on Galula's canonical 1964 book *Counterinsurgency Warfare*,⁴⁶ which he condemns as a collection of largely facile and unworkable principles.⁴⁷ Anthropologists such as David Price cast doubt upon its understanding of the anthropological and sociological theories that it promotes.⁴⁸ Commentators such as Patrick Porter question its reliance on understanding local culture as an explanatory factor in dictating insurgent (and counterinsurgent) actions.⁴⁹ Stathys Kalyvas questions whether the doctrine-writers properly understood the dynamics of violence and population behaviour during civil war; a vital consideration insofar as even externally directed COIN campaigns tend to be conducted in the midst of that type of conflict, while Stephen Biddle criticises its tendency to write politics out of the picture, pointing to the example of Iraq and the way in which it encouraged tactical initiatives to help quell violence that ultimately contradicted important considerations regarding host government legitimacy.⁵⁰ And Jacqueline Hazelton raises such doubts as to the presumptive benefits of 'population-centric' COIN as a whole that it appears that serious remedial work may be necessary in educating militaries how 'success' in COIN is actually caused.⁵¹ These points illustrate that in order to understand military behaviours during the prosecution of the sorts of COIN and stabilisation operations that characterise political warfare, one has to account for the intellectual and epistemological bases upon which respective doctrines are founded. The problem was pithily addressed by the journalist Ben Anderson when embedded with British troops in Helmand in June 2007, who were then operating under the doctrine of the so-called comprehensive approach:

The comprehensive approach looked perfectly feasible in a PowerPoint presentation when the beneficiaries, who weren't consulted, were viewed as automata. When applied to an actual society, especially one as fragmented, complicated and traumatized as Helmand's, it rarely lasted longer than the first ten minutes of a Shura.⁵²

Of course, in realistic terms COIN doctrine as it stands is about the best that can be expected when confronted by the range of complex and frequently non-military problems that fighting an armed insurgency offers. As Simpson acknowledges, it offers commanders and strategists the ability to draw upon a range of tools depending upon circumstance.⁵³ And of course the alternative to doctrine's drive for simplicity and consensus among its users is for it to fully reveal the complexity of the subject it examines. In the case of COIN, stabilisation and so-called hybrid warfare, this is potentially even more problematic than disguising it. Witness the Israeli theory of Systemic Operational Design (SOD) that emerged in the mid-1990s, authored by General Shimon Naveh and understood only by him, it would have appeared. In its determination to understand the Arab enemy and to provide appropriate conceptual approaches to defeating him, SOD forced its adherents to immerse themselves in the fields of psychology, systems analysis and postcolonial and postmodernist theory. It was intellectually admirable. It was also, as the 2006 war against Hezbollah revealed, practically incomprehensible. Reflect complexity it may have done, but it was also functionally useless.⁵⁴ In some ways FM 3-24, the British-centric JDP-04 and other similar doctrines have a similarly difficult task. To have the effect they purport to desire, they require military commanders and their subordinates to move beyond regurgitating principle and instead to apply complex theories of knowledge to matters of anthropology, sociology, psychology, culture and any number of aspects of human behaviour in a way that best serves the achievement of highly fluid political objectives through military *and* non-military means.⁵⁵ They also need to somehow square the contradictory pressures of functioning as a hierarchical organisation that operates in accordance with the commander's understanding of a given scenario, versus an operating environment that habitually offers competing forms of understanding of that same scenario depending upon where one sits in that hierarchy.

Ultimately, the problem of military doctrine is not one of intellect. As the distinguished American political scientist Robert Jervis observes,

Military officers tend to be intellectually sophisticated; the range of problems they have to deal with, the diversity of fields of knowledge on which they draw, their stress on the importance of what they call "situational awareness," and their

knowledge that they operate in complex environments, make them more open to new ideas – both good and bad – than their civilian counterparts in the foreign-policy apparatus.⁵⁶

The problems in reality are those of complexity and friction. In the service of political warfare, doctrine functions as the connective tissue lying between understanding and action. In reality, that entails sitting in the midst of a highly dysfunctional dynamic. Imperfect human and technical mechanisms are used to gather and interpret knowledge. That knowledge is then forced through the problematic and inherently corruptible ‘filter’ of doctrine. The resultant actions must then simultaneously tailor themselves to both complex sociopolitical conditions encountered on the ground and to the demands of far distant policy-makers; an oft-insurmountable tension. When perceived in this light, the question becomes not ‘why do things in in places like Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan go wrong?’ but rather, ‘why do they go even *partially* right?’.

Theme 4: Policy, Tactics and the Military Operational Code

The final theme relates to the impact of the cognitive ‘frames’ that affects military performance in COIN and stabilisation. With respect to these sorts of endeavours, the desirability of cultivating socio-cultural knowledge of the operating environment presents the ‘understand’ debate from a largely tactical, bottom-up perspective. But these ‘bottom-up’ forms of understanding will inevitably meet those emanating top-down, from decision-makers whose perspectives are influenced by ideological and/or strategic considerations far removed from the conflict zone. The problem is not simply the frequent differences in these two perspectives and the often contradictory demands that flow from them, but the fact that at the marriage between them sits the military.⁵⁷ Civilian administrators, political advisors and diplomats notwithstanding, it will generally be military commanders that are heavily involved in reconciling the reality of events on the ground with the strategic objectives demanded by their political superiors. And they bring with them an additional dimension to the problem, what Colin F. Jackson has described as the ‘military operational code’.

An operational code, much like the concept of a ‘schema’ or a ‘script’, is a set of beliefs about certain rules of action.⁵⁸ These beliefs frame the actor’s perception and diagnosis both of their environment in general and of specific situations, and provide norms and standards to guide and channel their choices of action therein.⁵⁹ In other words, an operational

code shapes the actions and policies of organisations in predictable ways. Jackson proposes that the military version of this code is dictated by a set of core beliefs that reflect the dominant logic of the military profession, namely an inherent preference for the application of force in order to compel submission. The influence of this upon the sorts of COIN and stabilisation operations that characterise political warfare are myriad but, as Jackson observes, it tends to shape military actions in three critical ways. The first is that the symptoms of insurgency or rebellion – mass violence, armed opponents and small battles – tend to lend the impression, near enough, of conventional war. Consequently, rather than considering the best (i.e. potentially non-military) strategy to restore state authority, military commanders tend instinctively to assume that the military defeat of their opponent is a prerequisite for dictating the desired political outcome; a not unnatural assumption if they have read their Clausewitz. This tends to encourage the immediate application of force before other non-violent initiatives can be allowed to take place. The second problem now emerges. The tactical victories invariably won by the counterinsurgent create a sense of measurable success but only serve to obscure the lack of progress being made toward a durable political settlement. This is compounded by the unwillingness of professional militaries to divert from this suboptimal approach lest it result in their being thrust into the less prestigious roles demanded by more subtle ‘political’ methods, i.e. ‘social workers, policemen or, worst of all, politicians’.⁶⁰

Jackson is not alone in his observation that the self-identity and self-interest of military actors dictate the way in which problems are framed and understood in broad terms, and thus affect the way in which power is exercised in theatre.⁶¹ The military operational code is an inherent and potentially ever-present friction whereby tactical and operational approaches to COIN- or stabilisation-type activities taken by military actors are shaped not by the desire to best fulfil political requirements, but by the desire to act in accordance with particularly powerful factors relating to organisational preference and professional self-identity. This matters hugely with respect to the sorts of delicate, politically charged missions examined in this book and has the potential to corrupt the way in which military commanders translate political-strategic demands into operational realities. As Brown observed of the US army after FM 3-24, when doing COIN or stabilisation operations that organisation has to be not only intellectually astute and highly attuned to the complexities of governance, political economy, religious belief, cultural practices and local mores, but it has to be willing to displace an emphasis on technological and tactical supremacy, strength, fortitude and patriotism.

Instead it must place emphasis on intellectual reflexivity, cultural sensitivity and cosmopolitan appreciation of cultural difference. In short, '[I]t has to remake its culture and approach to war through the terms of the effeminate political liberalism against which its own identity has traditionally been crafted.'⁶²

Perhaps in the final analysis the problem is a very simple one. Despite their frequent engagement in such conflicts Western militaries in particular are simply not suited to the demands of this form of political warfare. Their culture, technology and self-regard dictate that the acme of military skill remains large-scale conventional operations against peer competitors in which rapid and decisive victory is achieved through superior grasp of the conceptual, moral and physical components of fighting power. This stands in sharp contrast to the fundamental characteristics of COIN or stabilisation, namely long, drawn-out, asymmetric conflicts that may feature little in the way of face-to-face combat, which may have no perceptible end, which force military actors out of their intellectual comfort zone and which frequently result in either defeat or messy compromise. Ultimately, a complete anathema to military preferences.

3 Knowledge, Influence and Control

From the Imperial Era to the Modern Day

‘Conquering a country ... depends on courage and force, but colonizing it is tantamount to knowledge.’¹

‘The delusion of conquerors that the great mass of the population is just waiting to be liberated from the yoke of tyranny ... [A]t the very least this makes it extremely difficult to reliably assess the sheer effort involved in conquering a territory.’²

‘With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them.’³

The Human Terrain System. Modern population-centric COIN doctrine. The ‘Big Data’ phenomenon. All of these things reflect a similar preoccupation, namely the need to develop forms of understanding that can provide outsiders with influence and control over a resistant society or elements therein, and which allow relatively small numbers of counter-insurgents to deliver ‘stability’. Yet despite the modern terminology and the association with largely twenty-first-century conflict, these concepts are part of an intellectual trajectory that stretches from the high renaissance of European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through the Cold War to today. On the British frontier of India, in the US-controlled Philippines or in colonial French Indochina and North Africa the task was similar to that faced in Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan: to push into unknown territory; to generate influence and understanding there; to defeat rebellion; to fundamentally change that which already existed or to build relationships with local elements who could support one’s own political or strategic objectives. The result was (and is) a series of developments and practices that have, over time, found their expression in the form of contemporary COIN and stabilisation theory and doctrine.

Yet there is a reluctance by and large on the part of academics, commentators and practitioners to recognise how these historical practices relate to modern military operations. The absence of any real grasp of historical precedent is evident in the annotated bibliography of FM

3-24, where the first entry is Charles Callwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practices*.⁴ Although well-known to any student of Victorian-era military affairs, Callwell is almost entirely unknown to modern military professionals. Moreover his work is a somewhat odd choice of reading for modern counterinsurgents whose task at that point was to help facilitate the building of durable political change in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Callwell says a lot about the fine detail of the tactics involved in fighting irregular colonial wars but says little about the complexities of understanding, influencing and ultimately controlling a potentially hostile population, which is in large part the business of the modern Western counterinsurgent. In reality, the intellectual roots of modern COIN and stabilisation are far more complex than a perusal of Callwell's work might indicate, and reflect the ideas and preoccupations of a number of European soldiers and imperial administrators who sought to transform their conquests into lasting political settlements, and who operated with a raft of ideological and scientific considerations in tow.

There were two particularly important guiding assumptions behind this process. The first was a growing Anglo-French (and later American) emphasis upon the use of military conquest in support of broader moral imperatives; the aforementioned 'civilising mission', or *mission civilisatrice*. The second, which emerged in support of the first, was a growing recognition of the fundamental importance of the types of knowledge – geography, castes, tribes, languages and so forth – required to police and rule space. These two guiding forces would result in a drive toward scientific rationalism aided by the emerging disciplines of ethnography/ethnology and which together would lead to a raft of initiatives designed to aid the gathering of 'colonial knowledge'.⁵ This desire to gain a proper, quasi-scientific understanding of the lands and peoples subject to imperial domination is to all intents and purposes the basis of the modern social science/population-centric approach to COIN. But no matter the motives for moving beyond a reliance upon brute force and repression, such developments should be seen for what they were. Rather than simply a natural extension of intellectual enquiry into the colonial sphere, it was a quest for forms of 'political technology' that would allow imperial powers to control and transform native societies.⁶ By providing the tools for identifying groups and interpreting native behaviours this newly emerging scientific approach would help create instruments and techniques for the ordering of the colonial world in cognitive and political terms, and which administrators could then use to remain in control of often fragile political or military situations. But that prompted a number of questions in turn. Was that control real or imagined? Did it

function only as long as those subject to it allowed it? And what would be the response if such measures failed to live up to expectations? Ultimately, the imperial era of conquest and rule would be defined by three themes that still resonate: the quest for 'knowledge' to help generate influence; the development of certain doctrines or theories of action in order to embed this influence; and the frequent need for violence to sustain and preserve that influence.

Colonial Knowledge

The sudden emergence in the early twentieth century of a new breed of ethnographers and anthropologists involved in the quest for imperial control has been well covered by scholars.⁷ But it risks obscuring the role that cruder forms of military ethnography played prior to that throughout much of the mid- to late nineteenth century. For in France, Britain, the United States and elsewhere it would be military officers who would in large part create the basis for the political technology required to control Empire's conquered spaces.

It was the French, arguably, who were initially the most committed to the concept of quasi-scientific forms of colonial knowledge. Subsequent to 1789 the tone of French imperialism had been heavily shaped by the philosophy of a Revolution committed to the spread of enlightenment ideals. The notion of a universalist set of values and the duty of the *mission civilisatrice* to spread these throughout the French Empire for the purpose of turning the inhabitants of those territories into Frenchmen created a unique approach to colonial administration. For the French the particularly intense debate between the rival theories of assimilation and association and the growing emphasis placed upon scientific knowledge in support of the imperial enterprise dictated that by the early twentieth century, and on the back of experiences in North Africa, Senegal, Sudan and Indochina over the previous seven decades, French colonial commanders would become leaders in the formulation of pacification as a form of combined military-political action in which the use of 'colonial knowledge' played a central role.⁸

Despite the fact that ethnography as a field of study would not emerge into the mainstream for some decades, French forces in Algeria undertook relatively crude forms of ethnographic research as part of their attempts to pacify the country after the military conquest of 1830–47. The Arab Bureaux, established in 1844, would be a key component of this effort. As Marshall Thomas Bugeaud, governor-general of Algeria, 1842–47, stated, 'The *Arab Bureaux* will now become the instrument of our actions, the force behind all our ideas.'⁹ In essence its task was to

ensure the intellectual conquest of Algeria, setting in place the foundations of French colonial knowledge there. In terms of their day-to-day activities the basic task of the Bureaux was to record everything in connection with religious customs, public morality, local and general laws and everything that related to tribal affairs. This latter aspect was considered to be of the most vital importance for the purpose of establishing political control. Bureau officers were expected to put themselves '[a]mong the populations: visit the markets, the tribes, and listen to the locals' complaints'.¹⁰ Such information would then be assiduously archived, digested and published. The numerous texts produced over the course of the following three decades by the 190 Bureaux provided a thorough, serious and quasi-scholarly attempt to understand Algeria: what it was, and how it should be governed. Of course, the mere production of knowledge did not necessarily produce a consensus as to what that knowledge represented. Herein lay the importance of the Bureaux: to recognise differing understandings of the same thing, and to decide which of these understandings should be established as the 'truth'.¹¹ It was the military ethnographers of the Bureaux that helped create the French colonial 'idea' of Algeria.

For the British, it was perhaps unsurprising that the birthplace of its own military ethnographers would be India, the 'Jewel in the Crown'.¹² As James Hevia illustrates, the late nineteenth century saw British military intelligence officers begin to experiment with methods of influencing and controlling the tribes that inhabited the unstable North-West border region.¹³ Their interests in doing so were fourfold: heightened influence would limit tribal raiding into the settled districts of the Punjab; it would constrain the ability of the Afghan government to provoke these same tribes into violence against the Government of India; it would allow control over the territory that they inhabited, which covered the main potential routes of advance from Afghanistan into India; and it would lessen the expense of responding militarily to tribal violence. Ethnographic knowledge, even though it was not termed as such, would become a vital component of the strategic imperatives of preserving internal security and safeguarding the region from attack by external forces. As a consequence, military intelligence officers progressed their activities beyond the writing of route maps and military reports and estimates of enemy strength and instead began to provide additional forms of information designed to allow 'penetration' of tribal society. These consisted of tribal tables, 'who's who'-type documents relating to tribal leadership figures, and short biographical reports on the various local religious leaders (mullahs). The result, over time, was a vast compendium of military/ethnographic information and statistics relating to

the local populations. Tabular charts organised by province and district were organised into columns labelled 'village', 'race/tribe', 'number of families' and 'headmen'. Following up on these were genealogies of individual tribal leaders and detailed appreciations of the tribe's economic resources, particularly in terms of grain production and surplus.¹⁴ This new 'knowledge-based' approach was rapidly adopted by military intelligence officers in application to Central Asia, Burma and India itself.

As with the French in Algeria and Indochina, such knowledge was intended as a means to an end. Besides facilitating the influencing or perhaps co-opting of native elements, it also sought more broadly to discern their potential attitudes toward the British in times of tension or military emergency. The notion of tribal or racial characteristics played heavily upon the official mind, burdened as it was with responsibility for defending the vast extent of Empire with limited resources to hand. Would members of tribe A be a welcome addition to the ranks of the Indian Army? Would tribe B be hostile to the movement of government forces across its territory? Such collations combined fine detail with bland generalities. Descriptions of particular tribes could delve into the detail of clan, sub-clan, section of sub-clan, fractions of sections and so forth, influential personalities within each, as well as minute detail concerning physical characteristics, customs and beliefs¹⁵ Yet the same reports simultaneously stressed common mentalities, attitudes and behaviours on the part of each significant tribal or ethnic population as a whole. Another notable characteristic was its basic instrumentality. Ethnography, even in its infancy as a field of activity and study, sought essentially to learn and understand. In the hands of the military, however, interest in local populations was dictated at heart by the need to control.

Some imperial powers were less interested in the practical uses of such detail, however. The US had begun to flirt with its own ways of developing recognisably 'colonial' forms of knowledge in the 1870s. Much like the British and French model, these origins were military in nature and aimed primarily at the requirement to administer a conquered and increasingly subjugated native Indian population. The Bureau of Ethnology, part of the Smithsonian Institution, had been formed in 1879 by US army officer Major John Wesley Powell to aid this process.¹⁶ Much like both the British and French model, the civilising mission was central to its purpose. And much like the British and French model, the translation of civilising ideals into action was highly problematic.¹⁷ But despite the tentative use of ethnographic methods in its pacification efforts within the boundaries of its own continental territory, the

United States government saw no need to apply these new scientific methods to the political administration of newly acquired imperial possessions in the Philippines and Cuba in any meaningful sense. Notwithstanding the military campaigns required to confront rebellion in both territories, the Americans' desire to penetrate native societies required little incentive to identify and collaborate with local elements as the exercise of power through native systems would be replaced by mechanisms of government that would replicate, to the greatest extent possible, the US model. The Americans, limited in their exposure to imperial acquisition, were uninterested in colonial rule *per se*. Their interest lay more in the establishment of free-standing democratic, representative governments, allied to American interests and thus able to provide a series of strategically located outposts for American military power, objectives that tilted administrators away from the requirement to properly understand the people that they sought to rule. If American culture and preferences were the ideal, then the only requirement lay in encouraging the adoption of that ideal. Their imperative therefore was not the fine-tuned understanding of local society but the manipulation of that society via large-scale development projects such as radical new education policies in order to ensure the strategic objective of marrying the Filipino people with a new cultural, social and political tradition.

The early twentieth century saw the gradual decline of the military's role in developing these forms of knowledge-based control. Imperial administrations no longer required immediate, rough-and-ready socio-cultural intelligence to help implement rule. Rather, their interests had generally turned by this point to more recognisably civilian-administrative concerns that emphasised the smooth economic running of the colonies; a matter of government rather than conquest. And it was clear that the military and its nascent expertise was considered unsuitable for such a subtle task. The military ethnographer slipped from the picture, their place taken by a new breed of colonial social scientist. The coincidence between changing imperial priorities and the emergence of anthropology as a recognised academic discipline was a fortunate one from both perspectives. From the point of view of the discipline, the requirements of imperialism would lend a hefty impetus to the emergence of anthropology as a recognised and respectable field of study in the civilian universities.¹⁸ But that would benefit imperial interests in reciprocal terms. Not only did anthropology offer critical and more intellectually developed forms of knowledge that could be used to fine-tune the efficacy of colonial administrative techniques, even more significantly it addressed a point of huge significance, namely the fundamental rightfulness of the imperial agenda. Anthropology, in a way that military

ethnography could never match, offered the prospect of using scientific theory to prove the legitimacy of imperial rule.

Despite its status as a broadly Western phenomenon, 'applied' anthropology as a component of imperial rule or security operations therein was commonly conceived to have begun with the British. In 1942 the controversial American anthropologist Margaret Mead noted how the British Empire had, many years earlier, 'invented a special use for anthropologists as advisers to Government'. Her explanation for this marriage of ideals was as follows:

In colonial countries, where a small colonial staff had to administer large areas filled with native peoples speaking diverse languages and practicing a large number of strange and diverse customs, there were always 'administrative problems' ... Trained to get to the outlines of a situation quickly in cultural terms, anthropologists were asked to find the source of the trouble and to suggest satisfactory answers.¹⁹

The introduction of these 'Government anthropologists' to colonial service had begun in Britain's African colonies. Terence Ranger provides an illuminating account of the changing nature of administrative methods there during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to this period, officials had tended to abide by the classical humanist tradition whereby useful information could be gathered simply by getting 'out and about' and observing subjects face-to-face. Whether termed 'sympathy' or 'tact', the ability to grasp the collective mood in an instant was considered an essential and attainable skill. Despite its superficiality and lack of intellectual rigour, this rough-and-ready form of 'knowing the native' often did work.²⁰ It worked in the first instance because, as Chinua Achebe notes, the picture of local society that resulted was valid to an extent, albeit in the same way that a picture of the visible tenth of an iceberg is valid: revealing yet worryingly incomplete.²¹ But it also worked because those under colonial rule generally *allowed* it to work. When they refused to adhere to the rules of the game, however, a fragile grasp of detail would be exposed. British administrators in India experienced a traumatic example of this in the form of the 'Great Rebellion' of 1857 and in repeated instances with respect to the Frontier tribes. Colonial administrators in the West Indies suffered the shock of the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865.²² The 1896 uprising in Rhodesia would bring forth sudden (and again shocked) admissions of a lack of real knowledge of the indigenous population on the part of British administrators there, as would the Igbo women's uprising in southern Nigeria in 1929.²³ Here lay Ranger's real point of interest: the reaction of the imperial powers when the inadequacy of their cherished mode of

thinking was exposed. It was at this point, he claims, that 'modern' colonialism emerged, and together with it social science as a proper tool of imperial order. Imperial rule and the control that came with it was to be a feat of minds rather than a feat of arms. Importantly, it would be undertaken by those who did not merely *think* themselves superior, but who based that sense of superiority upon rational knowledge. Such knowledge would provide the opportunity to convince colonial activists of the rightness of their cause, and of the right of European cultures to dominate. In other words, science would not just explain, it would also serve to justify theoretical assumptions as to the correctness of the imperial cause.²⁴ Perhaps most importantly, by giving power to the notion that conquered people could be socially and economically transformed, science strengthened the appetite of those charged with that purpose.

Thus, from the first decade of the twentieth century, Britain's African colonies became a particularly fruitful environment for this scientific thrust. The first site of this was Nigeria, where Northcote W. Thomas was appointed government anthropologist in 1908. His presence was in response to a crisis in the policy of indirect rule, introduced by Sir Frederick Lugard in the northern provinces of the country at the turn of the century but which had appeared to founder when subsequently applied to the west and southeast of the country.²⁵ Thomas was despatched to these regions to facilitate the extension of indirect rule there.²⁶ In South Africa an ethnological section of the native affairs department was established in 1919 in order to facilitate the 'smooth and harmonious' administration of the Bantu. In 1920 the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) appointed Captain Robert Rattray to the position of government anthropologist, while the following year a similar position was created in New Guinea. Back in Nigeria Dr Charles Meek, an administrative officer with anthropological training, played a major role in the 1927 revisions to systems of local rule. The Sudan civil service meanwhile had already secured the cooperation of Oxford and Cambridge in order to provide anthropological training to its candidates and went so far as to sponsor the distinguished anthropologists Charles Seligman and Edward Evans-Pritchard to carry out research in the country so as to facilitate government operations. But how effective were these individuals in contributing to the effective sustainment of colonial rule? Firstly, they weren't anthropologists per se. Rather they were government officials trained in anthropology. Secondly, and as Montgomery McFate points out in her valuable analysis of imperial anthropology during this period, the kind of knowledge crafted by those trained in 'academic' anthropology was largely unsuitable for government requirements. Generally descriptive rather

than analytic, it didn't sit naturally with the purpose of developing systems of influence that would allow tiny colonial administrations to rule vast indigenous spaces. As one official observed of Thomas, '[a]lthough able to report on language, custom, diet and disease ... [he was] less able to make social order as such intelligible'.²⁷

For the French in Africa meanwhile, a similar anthropological 'turn' would occur, albeit one that would produce a slightly different problem. With the exception of its colonial possessions in North Africa, early French colonial administration on the continent had relied upon the *broussard*, the practical man of action living in the bush, his knowledge acquired by immediate, sensory experiences and which could not be matched by other ways of learning.²⁸ But by the 1920s an entirely new generation of professional colonial administrators were graduating from the *Ecole Coloniale*, trained in African languages, ethnology and culture. It was clear that a different set of knowledge practices had been developed for the new generation of colonial administrator, and the differences in approach to the *broussard* were stark. But, in a distinctly different fashion to what was happening in Britain's African colonies, the knowledge practices developed by this new breed of anthropologically trained administrators were driven not by the intellectual purity of the discipline per se but by the needs of a particular set of problems relating to the establishment of political control in West Africa, which the French were seeking to link up with their interests in Algeria and Morocco. The requirement to secure uninhibited lines of communication between discontinuous spheres of influence and the subsequent pacification of pockets of local resistance to achieve stable colonial law and order required a particular type of highly simplified knowledge, one that relied primarily upon the use of surveys, listings and estimations. That knowledge became represented on standard forms, while native groups found themselves divided into simple categories: dissident or ally. Anthropology may have touched upon the practice of French colonial administration in much of Africa, but in the classroom only. In the field, the immediate requirements of a particular set of political circumstances ensured the reversion to a highly instrumental and quantifiable form of knowledge.

It was clear that neither the British nor French were entirely comfortable with their attempt to marry anthropology to the business of conquest and rule. For the former in particular, the critical intellectual foundations for relating forms of anthropological knowledge to the business of understanding (and thus potentially controlling) entire social orders would come too late to assist materially in the business of indirect rule.²⁹ As for the Americans, they were simply uninterested. But the

anthropological turn remained hugely important. As L'Estoile notes, by the interwar period the British, French and others were pondering a sudden and concerted challenge to the legitimacy of their imperial designs that presaged a moral crisis in colonialism.³⁰ There was now a pressing need to relegitimise the notion of colonial domination. In 1932 Albert Sarraut, French former minister of colonies, addressed a group of *Ecole Coloniale* officers on the matter of their philosophy of rule. 'We should not oppress, we should convince. About the supreme usefulness of our oversight, our scientific and moral superiority, and of the deep humanity of our intentions.'³¹ Sarraut's point was that domination required, above all else, legitimacy. Science, in the form of ethnology/anthropology, was now seen not simply as directly beneficial in aiding the practice of colonial rule but also, by virtue of showing rationality and reason, to be on the side of the colonising power, to demonstrate the legitimacy of that rule. And if one could force an international audience to accept the legitimacy of one's designs, then a conquered population would have no alternative but to follow suit.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then, up to the period of the Second World War, had witnessed an interesting series of evolutions in the cultivation, use and utility of 'colonial knowledge' in a variety of formats and for a variety of purposes depending upon the objectives sought. What becomes clear from the British and French experience in particular is the emergence of a series of quite subtle themes that nevertheless continue to resonate with modern-day practitioners. The first of course was the highly instrumental nature of the knowledge sought, designed as it was to lend the necessary ability to construct mechanisms of influence and control for a variety of purposes. This might mean the identification of local political leaders and the subsequent implementation and management of systems of indirect rule, or perhaps the groundwork for a policy of economic advancement. Rich and layered detail might be gathered at ground level and collected in many cases by highly intelligent and reflective individuals, a significant number of whom were drawn from the military and who give the lie to the caricature of unthinking racist. But the types of knowledge gathered by the most perceptive and intellectually orientated military ethnographers and civilian anthropologists were still filtered and ordered according to the preferences of bureaucrats charged with ensuring that colonial government acted firmly in the strategic interests of the metropole. In this way, knowledge of local society and political structures was required to reflect and accommodate the realities of imperial control, rather than reality on the ground, *per se*.

Related to this was the tendency of military and civilian administrators to frame and absorb colonial knowledge in particular ways. Despite a genuine and intellectually charged curiosity that was capable of matching or even surpassing the academic standards of the day, military ethnographers and their administrative superiors were far keener to arrange the information they gathered in digestible formats: graphic, tabular and often standardised records of local social, cultural and political knowledge. Importantly, the information was presented in such a way as to cut through the inherent complexity and often the fundamental unknowability of such things in order to provide coherent forms of digestible, actionable information. Such is to be expected from organisations that tend to avoid thinking in terms of ambiguity and abstractions. In the words of one interested observer, 'Blanket generalizations may obscure granular nuance, but nuance obscures effective planning.'³²

Colonial Doctrine

One of the primary requirements of colonial knowledge was to aid in the formation and application of specific pacification doctrines. Again, when it came to formalised methods, French colonial forces appeared far in advance of their imperial contemporaries, as was illustrated in the late nineteenth century in Indochina. There, the duo of Jean-Marie de Lannessan, governor-general of Tonkin (north Vietnam) 1891–4, and his subordinate Colonel Joseph Gallieni, began attempts to defeat a persistent insurgency then ongoing in that province.³³ Typical of French colonial activists, their intention from the beginning of their campaign was far more ambitious than the mere repression of violent dissent. Not only did they seek to inflict military defeat upon the insurgents, but they also sought to rebuild the province, rehabilitate the faltering relationship between the French and the Tonkinese, and improve the latter's economic welfare and general standards of living and so contribute to the policy of what would subsequently be termed *mise en valeur* (development and improvement).³⁴ Yet upon assuming office, de Lannessan had realised that French strategy was misfiring, most notably in its determination to bypass local Tonkinese authority figures. In response he advocated what he termed the 'Mandarin' policy, engaging those village leaders who comprised Tonkinese society's low-level power base. This form of collaboration was supplemented by a controversial new strategy of arming villagers and organising them into native militias, *linh-co*, to be employed against the insurgents. Simultaneously, Tonkin was organised into four discrete *cercles*, each one an administrative territory within which a specific military

commander simultaneously assumed the role and authority of a civil governor. After an initial armed campaign to suppress immediate insurgent activity, military operations and economic development occurred roughly simultaneously within each *cercle*, the latter taking gradual precedence as time progressed. The unified command structure whereby civilian and military authority was held by a single individual prevented overlapping responsibilities and interdepartmental rivalry.³⁵ The *cercle* rapidly became a mainstay of French technique in Indochina and subsequently in Madagascar where Gallieni, having observed de Lannesson's techniques, would implement the same system.³⁶ Interestingly it also cropped up in Cuba in 1899 at the hands of General John R. Brooke, the first US military administrator of the island. Upon assuming control of it following the departure of Spanish officials, Brooke had found a country devastated by three years of rebellion and warfare, with commerce, agriculture and housing almost totally destroyed and with 50,000 members of the Cuban Army of Liberation (CAL) gathering on the outskirts of Havana, clamouring for independence. Brooke's immediate reaction was to divide Cuba into four geographical regions, each under the command of a general officer maintaining both military and civil powers, the latter slowly relinquished in line with the establishment of native governors, who then served as conduits for American power.³⁷

But while, in American hands, the technique was largely administrative in function, in French hands it acted as a structural vehicle through which a specific operational technique, the so-called oil-stain (*tache d'huile*), developed in Tonkin by Lieutenant Colonel Théophile Pannequin, was implemented. Usually referred to today as the 'ink spot' strategy, it advocates the use of military forces to target specific areas, creating an environment amenable to economic and social development strategies that then facilitate the spread of security and stability like a spreading spot of ink/oil. Its initial incarnation under Gallieni was that of a fairly prescriptive three-stage strategy.³⁸ Strongholds were chosen and military forces deployed within; the military would then comprise a focal point of rudimentary economic development and gradually introduce themselves into the lives of the local populace, convincing them of the mutual interest of the two parties. As development accelerated within the centre of the *cercle*, initial development and security measures were already being implemented towards its outer reaches. By way of constant and simultaneous civil-military actions each strategic stronghold facilitated an ever-widening circle of security and development, until it merged with others to complete a total conquest.

Gallieni's doctrine would be familiar to any modern COIN or stabilisation expert. First and foremost, it dictated the rapid transition of his

forces from 'managers of violence' to managers of good governance. As Gallieni observed, each soldier should know that the most crucial task came *after* the shooting had stopped, 'when the army became instantly responsible for the social rebuilding and economic development of the occupied territory'.³⁹ Thus, once a territory or region had been cleared of enemy combatants, colonial troops were expected to immediately transform themselves into a force dedicated to the goals of governance and development; activities still considered the supposed key to peace and stability. Secondly, his method demanded a more detailed understanding of local political, cultural and social ecologies in order for French engagement at ground level to properly accord with local sentiment. To that end, the military began to collect information on a wide range of topics including a detailed appreciation of local mores, customs, language, religion; information relating to family and village organisation and the hierarchy of indigenous administration (specifically the distribution of power); the structure of indigenous administrative divisions and ultimately a study of the social and cultural characteristics of the entire indigenous population.⁴⁰ And lastly of course the basic bureaucratic structure of the *cercle*, with its joint civil-military emphasis and unified command chain, would be familiar to any veteran of the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) initiative in Vietnam, while the recent coalition campaign in Afghanistan would see the *cercle* comprise the fundamental basis of the US-UK Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) established there post-2006.

Yet French imperial COIN doctrine simultaneously provides some other, rather less encouraging, parallels with more modern COIN campaigns. Such was the seemingly self-evident logic behind the oil spot strategy that it continued to dominate thinking about counterinsurgency for decades to come, resurfacing for example during the US campaign in Vietnam during 1964's Hop Tac (Cooperation) offensive, and again during the coalition campaign in Afghanistan.⁴¹ Its failure to dislocate the insurgency in Vietnam nearly a century after Gallieni's efforts in the same region simply reinforced the fundamental problems of translating an abstract theory like the oil spot into military practice. On a piece of paper, the spreading oil is presented with a passive, uniform environment. The oil itself, representing the pacifying influence, is impervious to infection by that environment. The spread of the oil is marked by its expansion in all directions simultaneously, and ultimately that expansion is permanent and irreversible. In nearly all respects, that is *not* an accurate representation of the spread of government influence throughout a society subject to a violent insurgency or rebellion. The frequent violence meted out by colonial counterinsurgents was a reflection of that fact.⁴²

Colonial Violence

Despite being employed in the business of building influence and enabling rule by consent, it was always only a short step for the military to cross the divide between 'enlightened' methods of pacification and brutal violence. The reasons why they did so, however, are varied. At heart it was often reflective of a basic problem that the only way for the imperial power to get its preferred form of civilisation to stick was to force native peoples to accept that imposition. Within that it was also a manifestation of an age-old problem faced by militaries charged with weighing up the most timely and effective means of delivering stability and security in the face of violent resistance. What importance should be attached to things like gaining a detailed knowledge of local society, its power structures and similar in order to engage in governance reform and developmental initiatives that may or may not lead to eventual peace, versus the physical destruction of the enemy? The former promised potential far-reaching benefits but the latter held out the promise of a more immediate and measurable form of progress and resolution. Ultimately the use of violence as part of the exercise of power in preference to more recognisably political actions might not be evidence of cruelty or lack of imagination, *per se*. It also reflected the basic truism that defeating violent resistance to that rule or occupation required an uncomfortable and often unmanageable blend of politics and violence where the latter might have to take precedence at certain points.

The Arab Bureaux of the mid-nineteenth century are a case in point. As Thomas Rid has illustrated, the Bureaux may have been the ground-level interlocutor between the tribes and French colonial rule, but they were also part and parcel of a counterinsurgency and pacification campaign that perceived the collection and absorption of socio-cultural intelligence as an integral aspect of a violent military response to local resistance. In particular, such information lent focus and direction to the notorious flying columns, the *Razzia*, that defined French operational doctrine during this period under Bugeaud's command, and which sought to raid, loot and sometimes destroy entire native Algerian communities. These actions could not function without intelligence on local tribal attitudes and loyalties and it was the Bureaux that provided that intelligence. As the only persons within the French administration who possessed timely, ground-level intelligence with respect to a tribe's political loyalties, Bureaux officers were explicitly and purposely responsible for transmitting relevant information to various military and intelligence units upon request. Indeed their functional military role was emphasised to an even greater extent by their recruitment and command

of the *Goum*. Comprising between 50 and 600 irregular horsemen drawn from local tribes, the *Goum* was ostensibly used for policing functions in peaceful areas so as to provide day-to-day security in lieu of a costly French military presence. But when required, it swiftly became a tool of vicious reprisal under the command of Bureaux officers. In this way firmly 'political' role of the the Arab Bureaux was easily weaponised.⁴³

The example of the Bureaux was reflective of a dark tendency for military actors engaged in the process of cementing imperial rule to willingly abandon the often frustratingly slow and imprecise political approach for that which accorded more naturally with their martial tendencies. The US pacification campaign of 1903–7 against the Islamic Moro Islanders of the southern Philippines is a case in point. It was headed by Major General Leonard Wood, an individual steeped in the political approach as a result of his prior service in Cuba. As military governor there he had regenerated local government, transformed the judiciary, reformed the police and rewritten the constitution, all of which had been facilitated by a largely willing and compliant populace glad to be freed from the cruelties of Spanish rule.⁴⁴ In the form of the Moro, however, he was to be confronted by an impenetrable tribal society unreceptive to the offer of civil governance and educational and judicial reform. As resistance built among the more powerful Moro leaders who stood to lose the most from submitting to American military authority, Wood exhibited increasing frustration with a people who, it appeared, could not recognise the blindingly obvious benefits of American rule. Within months, his attempts at a political approach had been dropped in favour of a series of large-scale military operations which during the next three years would result in the deaths of thousands of Moro villagers. But why should Wood so readily abandon his seemingly progressive philosophy? The accusation has been levelled that, hitherto famous for his administrative and reform work in Cuba, his willingness to abandon conciliatory methods and adopt an overtly punitive policy was a result of his recognition that army officers were rewarded for their fighting prowess rather than their administrative skills. Without having commanded a significant military campaign or expedition, the career of this hugely ambitious officer might fade into obscurity. A visible, if costly, military victory over the Moro was preferable to their gradual and unnoticed pacification.⁴⁵

But Wood's turn to violence also hinted at a broader problem, namely that the various sophisticated techniques developed by imperial actors to implant and cement their authority within indigenous societies were often ineffectual. In this respect, the laudatory reports from the 'edge of empire' that celebrated colonial warfare as a subtle blend of limited

military force in support of primarily political actions often hid an uncomfortable reality where either the political side of things was largely fruitless in terms of measurable advantage, or the levels of violence imposed made a mockery of any pretence at civilised behaviour. With respect to the former problem, one can take the French in late nineteenth-century Indochina as an example. Despite the much-publicised strategy of combined civil-military administration underpinning a policy of socio-economic development, in reality it was unclear precisely how successful this had been in pacifying Tonkin. Gallieni in particular appears to have been handed a victory that he simply did not achieve. Indeed as Porch proposes, not only was Tonkin not pacified in any genuine sense but the periods of stability that ensued during his tenure in command were due less to any 'ink spots' than they were to a series of unrelated developments affecting the behaviour of powerful local warlords, as well as the actions of Chinese proconsuls on the other side of the border.⁴⁶ Consequently, and despite the continued application of his 'method', once the behaviour of these other actors changed, violence soon returned to Tonkin. The controversy does not end there. Gallieni's subordinate Hubert Lyautey would subsequently apply the same 'enlightened' methods to the Sud-Oranais region of North Africa in the early 1900s. Despite significant success in urban and lowland areas, he was eventually forced to rely upon brute military conquest in his attempts to subdue powerful tribal groupings in more remote areas such as the Middle Atlas. Time and again political initiatives directed at the tribes were either abandoned in favour of sheer force or, more commonly, not even attempted at all. The 'clear, hold, build' strategy demanded by the oil-spot technique was far simpler in principle than in practice, especially when applied to the transhumant Berber tribes.

In other parts of the world, of course, the problem was less the fact that colonial militaries fell on the wrong side of the military/political philosophy in their actions and more that politics never even entered their mind in any meaningful sense. A whole host of factors combined to ensure that lethal violence dominated in the encounter between imperial counter-insurgents and native societies. Dierk Walter's writings in particular illustrate a number of powerful tendencies at play in this regard. There was the aforementioned pressure of military necessity. There was an obvious tendency toward racism, itself often motivated by a sense of fear and 'cultural distance', as well as outrage at perceived contraventions of the accepted rules of warfare on the part of insurgents. There was a frequent adoption of demonstrative or exemplary acts of violence in order to compel and cow local peoples, as well as simple retributive punishment for their refusal to heed such warnings. There was also the

fact that both imperial actors and natives might be drawn from their own cultures of violence. In addition, simple institutional dynamics might dictate that imperial actors chose violence as the most rapid way of achieving set objectives as quickly as possible, or were required to adopt extreme methods in order to facilitate those objectives, i.e. permanently depriving local peoples of their land (by exterminating them) in order for it to be given to European settlers.⁴⁷ Numerous such behaviours were evident throughout the featured case studies. On the Frontier, violent ‘punishment’ by way of the Indian Army or Royal Air Force was a routine response to tribal transgressions. In Algeria, racist attitudes on the part of French soldiers contributed to a dehumanising of ordinary Algerians, thereby facilitating the application of violence against them. So too in Vietnam where racism, emphasised by the sheer fear and mistrust felt by raw US conscripts towards the peasant, facilitated the indiscriminate use of force against the civilian population. In Iraq and Afghanistan, coalition soldiers expressed racist attitudes and displayed disgust at the behaviours of a hidden enemy whilst, as will be illustrated, often prioritising the application of violence when possible even in contravention of doctrinal guidelines.⁴⁸ In that sense, the modern era differs little in important respects from the colonial era, albeit with the important exception of the actual scale of abuses. But then again, as Walter points out, one cannot simply reduce the era of imperial expansion to one of continual abuses of power by the strong against the defenceless. Imperial war aims were primarily about the control, exploitation and forced modernisation of given territories or societies. Extermination was actually an anomaly, for something generally had to be spared, and then potentially co-opted, in order for it to be exploited.⁴⁹

The Cold War to Today: Population-centric Counterinsurgency, Human Terrain and Big Data

Despite its imperial leanings in the Philippines and Cuba from the late nineteenth century, the United States was minimally engaged in the quest to perfect methods of imperial control in the same way that had preoccupied the British and French. The priority was the rapid establishment of US values and systems in place of local ones. The methods for marrying Filipinos or Cubans with a new cultural, social and political tradition were intensive economic development, educational initiatives based on the American school system, and the emplacement of judicial and municipal models again drawn straight from the United States. There was no need to understand the native if the native was, to all intents and purposes, a proto-American. Post-World War II, however,

the picture changed somewhat. The emergence of the USSR and China as communist powers in opposition to the West, and the subsequent descent of the two rival camps into a Cold War, now shifted the 'knowledge' debate away from the European imperial powers and into the hands of the United States. As Joy Rohde observes, with policymakers now perceiving a pressing requirement for detailed knowledge of the 'other' – be that the communist adversary or a third country/region in which the United States might seek to establish influence in order to block its advance – the Cold War quickly became the social scientist's war. American national security officials declared that the attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of foreign peoples were as significant to the Cold War confrontation as missile silos and regional alliances. They observed Mao's victorious revolutionary warfare campaign in China and began to seek the antidote to its export. Psychological and political warfare, guerrilla operations, and COIN, much of which would be conducted in cooperation with indigenous allies, would soon become the order of the day. To educate itself, and to mobilise its new proxies and partners, the US army turned to social scientists and area studies experts for assistance.⁵⁰

Rohde's analysis of this emerging relationship is instructive and illustrated some of the issues that would emerge in the post-9/11 era. Then as now, the military had turned to the academy in the belief that a new intellectual approach was required to address an unfamiliar challenge. But it quickly became apparent that what the former really wanted was not thorough, 'academic' research but highly detailed reports on certain subjects of interest: minority groups threatened by communist subversion; case studies of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies; psychological operations and civic action. In other words, they wanted anything that was instructional in nature and could be easily served up in the classrooms of military academies and war colleges or provided on request to busy military commanders and staff officers in Vietnam concerned with the matter of COIN and pacification. What the military was *not* interested in was anything that smacked of complex social theory and which required a lateral approach to drawing out its relevance to military interests. The case of the political scientist William Hanna in this regard is instructive. During the 1960s he was engaged on a project that used sociological theory to predict the likelihood of communist insurrection in certain African cities. The resulting report was described by the army as being far too complex to allow effective absorption of the material and thus of very limited use for military purposes. Yet when the report was subsequently published as a monograph it was derided by academic reviewers as overly simplistic and full of self-evident generalisations.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the US military was still keen for anthropological input as it grappled with the demands of irregular warfare. The Vietnam War was host to one of America's most celebrated anthropologists, Gerald Hickey, who played a formative role in shaping US and GVN counter-insurgency efforts as part of the pacification campaign undertaken there during the 1960s. During his nearly two decades in-country, Hickey produced a mixture of academic anthropological research, such as that on South Vietnam's Highlander population, combined with numerous reports for the RAND Corporation on matters such as 'The Vietnamese Strategic Hamlets: A Preliminary Report' (September 1962), 'The American Military Advisor and His Foreign Counterpart: The Case of Vietnam' (March 1965) and 'Accommodation in South Vietnam: The Key to Sociopolitical Solidarity' (October 1967).⁵² But despite his celebrated reputation among the military and policymaking elites, Hickey's memoir chronicled the ways in which his reports were used in highly selective ways or simply ignored in order to allow the pursuit of certain military or political objectives.⁵³ Ultimately, as David H. Price states, Hickey appeared unable to consider the possibility that the overwhelmingly powerful dynamics governing the military's consumption of anthropological knowledge, allied to the forms of warfare by which neocolonial states sought to suppress insurgencies, might lead to such outcomes.⁵⁴

The latter point is key. In truth, FM 31-16 (Counterinsurgency Warfare), the COIN doctrine that guided US actions in Vietnam and elsewhere during this period, displayed very little interest in prioritising the sort of detailed, ethnographic knowledge that was Hickey's stock-in-trade. Instead it delivered a curious hodgepodge of modernisation theory, some dated observations on the nature of guerrilla warfare and hastily assembled principles of counter-revolutionary warfare, all underpinned by the language of conventional offensive warfare and decisive battle. In essence, and despite its intent to frame irregular warfare as a distinct category of military operation, the prescribed response appealed instinctively to the military's desire, where possible, to interpret counterinsurgency and pacification as simply the other side of the conventional warfare coin. Exhortations for military actors to develop a detailed knowledge of the operating environment referred almost exclusively to matters such as terrain and geography rather than those of culture, society or politics.⁵⁵ This doctrinal divorce between ethnography/anthropology and the exercise of military power was further exacerbated by those political scientists and technocrats who had been advocating a far more rationalist, quantitative approach to the theory and practice of COIN and irregular warfare, and who dismissed a deep knowledge of the indigenous sociopolitical environment as irrelevant. Regardless of the fact that their

chosen approach was equally unable to halt the eventual swamping of South Vietnam by the communist North, the intellectual impetus shifted to those who dismissed COIN and all that came with it as a profitless distraction from the threat posed by the Communist Bloc. The army turned its back on the previous decade-and-a-half of operations, destroyed its material on COIN held at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and planned instead for an interstate war against the Soviet Union.⁵⁶

Despite this apparent rejection of COIN, American, British and French involvement in such operations continued during the 1980s in Central and South America, Northern Ireland and Africa. But the conservative and limited nature of these conflicts precluded the need for any input that might be provided by obscure fringes of the social sciences. Besides which, the nascent Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) now promised the notion of technologically dominant conventional military forces that would be able to thoroughly defeat any potential enemy on the field of battle, from high-end peer competitors to lowly insurgents. Technology alone would ensure that armies trained in conventional warfare would be able to sidestep the requirement to think differently about COIN/pacification; that the competencies that would allow them to function victoriously in the pressurised cauldron of the former would simply trickle down to enable the effective prosecution of the latter. All that was required was the application of technocratic doctrinal theories such as 'Effects Based Operations' (EBO). Such grand theories of action dictated that the only knowledge and understanding that mattered when it came to irregular warfare was the effective translation of abstract doctrinal principles into action.⁵⁷

It was a philosophy that endured until evidence of its incipient failure became apparent with Iraq's descent into a hyper-violent quagmire in 2004/5.⁵⁸ It was at this point that assumptions as to the ability of forces trained in high-end manoeuvre warfare to effortlessly assume the mantle of counterinsurgents were acknowledged as unrealistic, and abandoned. In their place there emerged a new-found enthusiasm on the part of COIN doctrine for energetic forms of population-centric, politico-military activism, something promoted decades before by David Galula and Robert Thompson courtesy of their experiences in Algeria and Malaya respectively, but which was now resurrected to an intense degree by 2006's FM 3-24 (Counterinsurgency). Such a philosophy was given further life by the Human Terrain System, which now sought not only to reintroduce ethnography and social science back onto the COIN/pacification battlefield, but to do so while intimately embedded among military practitioners. Here was the re-emergence of a philosophy of action redolent of the colonial era, one that promoted close engagement

with the political and social structures encountered *in situ*, but which reinforced the accumulation of this local knowledge with the opportunities now offered by modern technology to better harmonise that knowledge in the service of military objectives. In both Iraq and Afghanistan it offered the promise of a far more discriminating guide to the use of military power so as to ensure that counterinsurgents could better incorporate the realm of the social when seeking to match their naturally violent and disruptive actions to the process of state-building. But in their execution such ambitions largely failed to materialise.

However, while the failure of the HTS to have any really measurable effect upon the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan contributed to the halting of the project in 2011, it is clear that the basic premise of population-centric COIN, i.e. that the population holds the key to victory, still grips the imagination of those thinking about what is required to prevail in 'small wars'. Consequently, much thinking on the subject continues to privilege an understanding of the sociopolitical dimension to COIN. And thanks to advances in information capture and systems analysis, technology now proposes not simply to bolster our attempts to gain a granular level of detail relating to matters of culture, attitudes and beliefs (and thus potential malleability), but provide real-time observation of actions, behaviours and habits. This modern era of human terrain analysis combined with the information dominance offered by big data argues that we are on the cusp of a revolution in our ability not only to understand the fine detail of societies far different from our own, but to tailor that understanding even more precisely to the objective of delivering peace and stability. But in important respects there is a sense of things coming full circle. For what re-emerged within COIN theory post-2006 was a powerful set of assumptions about the role of military power as an instrument of change. Unwittingly, and without benefit of a historian's eye for the inherent problems contained within those assumptions, a powerful cadre of soldiers, policymakers and scholars helped reprise the 'totalising' ambitions of Liberal empire. No longer simply a tool to defeat insurgency, COIN became an integral aspect of the twenty-first century's return to the quest for a political technology that could assist the process of social engineering and, by extension, the radical adjustment of native political structures and traditions. And despite the chastening experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan, the seductive new capabilities offered by technology in terms of better 'understanding' those sorts of societies will potentially only end up feeding that hubris.

4 'Peaceful Penetration' on the North-West Frontier, 1919–39

Despite the advances made by social science as an aid to colonial control during the early twentieth century, one of the most revealing case studies of imperial 'understanding' in action during this period comes not from Africa, where trained 'anthropologists' had become part of the British colonial government's administrative repertoire. Instead it came from the isolated and violent enclave of the North-West Frontier, where 'classical' forms of knowledge-gathering continued to dominate up to and post-World War II. Here was a hotbed of government activism, where officials sought to actively manipulate and shape local social and political structures in the pursuit of peace and stability.¹ Ostensibly focused upon keeping tribal resistance to imperial rule at palatable levels through cost-effective administration, in reality these actions hid determined attempts by officials of the Indian Political Service – the so-called 'politicals' – to effect transformative change upon aspects of native Pashtun society.² The politicals would seek to use their proximity to that society to literally reshape it from the ground up: to change structures, to direct channels of influence and ultimately to recast the behaviours at play. In pursuit of this they would toy with methods designed to transform highly independent tribes with a tradition of resistance to external authority into those that adopted a fixed, pastoral existence with economic ties to the settled districts of India. Pacification, it was believed, should come not at the point of a gun, but at the hands of a much broader political effort.³

But such aspirations spawn an obvious question. Why, after decades' presence on the Frontier and operating by way of a system of administration that prioritised this political effort, was British rule afflicted by so many outbreaks of violent resistance? One could claim, of course, that the British system of colonial control on the Frontier failed simply as a consequence of violent illegitimacy.⁴ And there is merit to aspects of that claim. But it ignores specific facets of the British–tribal encounter on the frontier that deserve greater scrutiny, such as the unpredictable complexity of interacting with reactive indigenous societies even when the objectives sought were limited, let alone transformative. There were also the

problems associated with the practice of 'light-touch' imperialism, where although senior British officials sought to remain free of the complications and costs of overt involvement in local systems of rule, the dividing line between agents of the imperial power and the societies they oversaw remained highly permeable. The result over time was an increasing and seemingly unstoppable tendency for officials on the ground to interfere in the internal constitutions of the social and political systems that they encountered.

In essence, the Indian Frontier during this period provides us with a valuable case study of the relative value of specialists in aiding the pacification of violent territories. It allows an appreciation of the capabilities and competencies of a specific organisation, in this case the Political Service of the Government of India, in terms of how its people went about the cultivation and employment of local knowledge in pursuit of 'influence', and draws into the picture the rival appreciations of military partners in the form of the Indian Army. As a consequence, a number of further points of interest emerge with respect to these two rival actors. What were the political methods used to build influence within the tribal areas? What did these say about the expertise of that cadre? And how effective was the political approach in challenging the military perception of how security should be delivered?

Environment and Personnel

The Frontier political officer concept is an interesting one. The British Empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries relied in large part upon various systems of indirect rule in which tiny numbers of civilian administrators *in situ* represented the authority of colonial government. In places such as Kenya, Malaya, Borneo or Somaliland, i.e. territories controlled by the Colonial Office, these were known as 'district officers' and they performed both an administrative and judicial role.⁵ In India, where they generally served as diplomatic representatives to the independent states, they were known as 'political officers'.⁶ Often their role was purely diplomatic, but in contact with India's more unstable borders, such as on the North-West Frontier, the Political Service deployed a small number of officers into the field, tasked with understanding and interpreting the political and human 'terrain' in each of these regions, and judging precisely what that information implied for a host of internal and external considerations playing on the minds of policymakers. These men functioned as both a corpus of local knowledge as well as the instrument through which that knowledge could be used in the preservation or furtherance of imperial rule. And of all the territories

that the British Empire sought to control during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the North-West Frontier was perhaps the most testing against which the political officer was required to serve as a tool of external authority. As a concept it was designed to provide an intelligent and cost-effective response to the problem of securing control over what was perceived as strategically vital territory, something that it was broadly successful in doing albeit in conjunction with significant military assets in support. Yet a closer look reveals significant and sometimes surprising shortcomings in the capabilities, competencies and attitudes of the experts employed for the purpose.

This should come as little surprise. The North-West Frontier has been caricatured in popular literature as the site of a simplistic trope, i.e. the confrontation between noble (Pashtun) savage and urbane British administrator.⁷ But that encounter was in reality a deeply complex and layered one. In terms of the basic human environment, the Frontier was a complex web of tribal confederations, some twenty in total supporting a population of about 6–800,000, each practising a different form of internal rule or system of government and each competing against the others for advantage and/or political influence, often drawing in the British as part of their designs.⁸ Along the length of the Frontier the twin influences of Islam and pre-Islamic tribal custom created an intricate moral and social framework that frequently baffled outsiders. Tribal society was highly parochial and enclosed, yet simultaneously was affected markedly by the attentions of neighbouring states (Afghanistan and British India). Even after seven decades of interaction, with the exception of a handful of individuals, British government officials were apt to regard regions such as Waziristan as an almost complete *terra incognita*. Nevertheless, attempts were made through the drawing of maps and the imposition of borders to create a recognisable, schematic interpretation of the various boundaries of the tribal 'problem'. In this way, over time the Frontier was divided into two parts: the settled districts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) which lay under British authority, and the five supposedly autonomous tribal agencies sandwiched between the NWFP and Afghanistan to the west.⁹ These were, from north to south: Malakand, Khyber, Kurram, and North and South Waziristan. Each of these was the responsibility of a British political agent (PA), his assistant (APA) and potentially a number of native assistants (assistant political officers, or APOs). Waziristan, due to its size and the presence within of volatile warring elements in the form of the Mahsud and Wazir tribes, merited an additional senior political officer to oversee his two colleagues. In total, with their administrative superiors in Peshawar, the political cadre only

numbered around thirty men. Such was the basic structure of British frontier administration.

Unlike the vast majority of colonial administrators across the rest of the Empire, the Frontier political cadre were overwhelmingly former military officers. Generally recruited in their mid- to late twenties, a brief period of classroom instruction was followed by rotation through specific agencies roughly every two years, thus enabling them to serve in multiple agencies throughout the duration of their career and often returning to certain agencies in more senior capacities. They would almost without exception remain employed exclusively on the Frontier, where their particular specialist expertise in tribal matters, gained over years of service, was considered indispensable to government.¹⁰ The bulk of that expertise was developed in the field by way of lengthy periods of immersion within local society and a high degree of engagement with tribesmen via individual contact or by engagement with the tribal assembly, or *jirga*. The basic job of the political when in the field was to circulate among the clans and sub-tribes, acting as the government's eyes and ears, gathering intelligence and investigating rumours, disbursing allowances to tribal leaders, adjudicating over petty disputes and generally trying to predict potential points of friction. As one former political officer described it, the job was to 'know everyone and everything, to be aware of which way the cat was going to jump before it left the ground, and to keep it from jumping on forbidden soil'.¹¹ In times of stress, however, he would assume the role of political advisor (POLAD) to local military commanders in action against a given tribe. Knowledge of local figures of influence, a potentially informed understanding of the roots of a particular violent outburst and the ability to establish lines of communication with the tribes during periods of turbulence would theoretically allow a more focused and surgical application of influence or force.

The basic task of tribal administration on the Frontier, then, was to be projected into a highly charged, complex and reactive environment and to create rough order according to the government's interests. Notwithstanding its obvious shortcomings, the political officer system was about as effective a system as could possibly be constructed for that purpose. As a conduit for communicating information, grievances, expectations and demands in both directions, tribe and state were served by the presence of embedded individuals, strategically placed, whose task was to balance the interests of both parties, where possible, through a policy of personal interaction and mediation. The real interest, however, lies in the measures taken when political officers sought to influence and control tribal behaviour. For the political was not simply a neutral administrative functionary. He was, when circumstances required, the

human instrument of the imperial urge to control. But the question of how precisely to do this, and the extent to which it was practically or financially feasible within the constraints of government policy, was one that would continually bedevil policymakers in general and the Political Department in particular.

Instruments, Ideologies and Frictions

On the surface, British policy on the Frontier during the period 1919–39 appeared unimaginative. Along its 700-mile length, nearly fifty Indian Army battalions – sixteen of them based in central Waziristan alone – sat poised to respond to outbreaks of violent resistance. Such a vast deployment gave the impression of a purely military response to the matter of managing relations with the tribes. But in reality, while policy appeared on the surface to remain largely static, it was not for want of debate or lack of propositions for alternative methods of engagement with the local population.¹² And without exception, these came from the politicals, who over the course of this period pondered, and engaged with, a multitude of measures designed to ameliorate the fractious state of tribe–government relations

Broadly speaking, the political cadre subscribed to the notion that tribal attitudes and behaviours were not fixed in permanent opposition to external rule; that they could be adjusted or even transformed by way of a range of inducements and incentives and that these in turn could be informed by the expertise of practitioners who would be able to ensure that the methods utilised could contribute to the achievement of peace and stability. On this basis, political officers approached this ‘civilising’ of the tribes in a two-tier fashion. The first was practical and instrumental and sought to engage the tribesmen, in a material sense, with British administration. Money in the form of tribal allowances and opportunities for paid service within tribal and frontier security units were the basic tenets of such an approach. But overarching these limited, practical initiatives were increasingly energetic attempts from 1930 onward by way of a policy of ‘peaceful penetration’ that sought to broaden the debate about the need for socio-economic development within the tribal areas, and the extent to which the civilising mission should serve not only British interests but those of Pashtun society more broadly: questions as to the role and values of Empire as much as they were about the pacification of the tribal areas. But regardless of which tier the political approach favoured, be it instrumental or ideological, their chosen approach still had to survive the complexities thrown up by interaction

with tribal society and the broader concerns of government and the military.

Tier 1: Instrumental Pacification: Allowances and Armed Civil Forces

The 'allowance' system was a fundamental component of the political method of frontier administration from the late nineteenth century until the end of the British presence in India in 1947–8. Ostensibly awarded on the basis of a tribe's continued good behaviour, it was designed to forge crude common ground between two parties otherwise deeply divided in their appreciation of whose authority should hold sway. Indeed, in preference to costly and highly provocative military operations, it was the withholding of allowances, and other non-violent measures, that formed a major plank of the Political Service's response to a range of tribal transgressions as well as a way of directing funds into the tribal areas for more positive purposes. But despite its simplicity, the allowance system gave rise to a host of issues that illustrate how seemingly simple solutions cause their own complex problems.

The first problem was a practical one. The allowance system had to be cheaper than an alternative system of physical, armed repression. Yet it also had to accommodate the escalating demands of a number of powerful tribal confederations vying for primacy in the eyes of the government and prestige in relation to one another.¹³ This not only placed potentially inflationary pressure upon the amounts disbursed but, in an effort to keep such outlays under control, required fine judgement as to which tribes were in the ascendancy and which could justify less or more expenditure in relation to the other. This mattered to government accountants obviously, but it also mattered hugely to the tribes themselves who suddenly perceived an officially sanctioned metric by which their value was measured in both absolute and relative terms. The technical and political difficulties of providing sufficient allowances to satisfy the economic self-interest of the tribes while simultaneously paying as little as possible, all the while balancing the relative importance of each tribe in terms of the individual amounts paid relative to one another, was a complex process fraught with the potential to cause offence. Indeed, the matter of allowances was a fundamental preoccupation of the Political Service throughout the course of its employment on the Frontier. The other problem, and the most obvious objection to the payment of allowances in general, was that it essentially abrogated the government of responsibility for more meaningful interaction with the tribes.¹⁴ It was, in the eyes of many within and outwith the Service, a

bribe. It did not address the root causes of violence. Not only was it not enough to materially aid the tribes in pursuing a higher standard of living, but it simply acted as an inducement to violent behaviour in the search for (a) an even more substantial bribe, and (b) the use of allowances for the purchase of weapons and the building of fortifications. This not only posed a problem for the government, which would obviously encounter those same weapons and fortifications in times of conflict, but it resulted in the displacement of more productive and self-sustaining economic activity on the part of the tribes in favour of the acquisition of capabilities that only enhanced the tendency toward internecine conflict. This by extension further militated against meaningful economic gain and only increased the reliance upon allowances. In such a way the government found itself trapped in a circular dynamic by which it paid for the aggression that it faced.

The alternatives were unpalatable, however. In an immediate and practical sense, the withdrawal of allowances might result in a sudden and prolonged explosion of violence on the part of the now even further impoverished tribesmen.¹⁵ In respect to the moral argument, i.e. that the government was engaging in simple bribery and that it should take its responsibilities to the tribes more seriously by implementing more substantive forms of engagement, the practicalities of such a change in policy loomed large. It would not only require an officially sanctioned policy of interference in tribal life – a highly provocative act to groups that resented any hint of outside interference in their affairs – but also it would require the wholesale recasting of values and attitudes within. For example, if the leading cause of death among tribesmen was murder at the hands of male relatives over land disputes then the primary safeguard against such a threat was the acquisition of rifles and ammunition and the building of fortified dwellings.¹⁶ Pushing money at the tribes risked the proliferation of these things and further increases in levels of inwardly directed violence. The government was facing a deeply complex set of issues embedded within the habits and customs of Pashtun society and which it was ill equipped to adjust in its favour. It could either respect the independence of the tribal areas and accept the violence – both inwardly and outwardly directed – that accrued as a result, or it could reach into those areas and seek to manipulate value systems and behaviours within and run the likely risk of far greater levels of violence as well as the almost certain prospect of failure. The debate was one which preoccupied many within the Political Department, and indeed would never be adequately resolved before the architecture of Frontier administration was dismantled in 1947.

The practical and moral shortcomings of the allowance system therefore dictated that it could never suffice as the only method of regulating

tribal behaviours. The politicals required additional methods that could engineer some form of positive influence not simply by injecting money into the tribal areas, but by demanding reciprocal responsibilities that might result in the gradual engendering of pro-government sentiment across the most violent or sensitive parts of the Frontier. Consequently, there arose post-1921 a series of initiatives to give life to such aspirations, which came under the umbrella of the Armed Civil Forces (ACF). Within the tribal areas this took the form of a tribal police force (*khassadari*) and the Transfrontier Corps, a series of separate militias drawn from different parts of the Frontier. Both forms of service mimicked well-worn techniques used by a variety of colonial powers, both had their own logic, and both came with their own distinct problems when applied in practice.

For political officers stationed in Waziristan – probably the most consistent site of both anti-government and inter-clan violence along the entire Frontier – the lack of significant or lasting leadership figures among the highly democratic dominant tribes (Wazir and Mahsud) led to the identification of the tribal assembly, or *jirga*, as the most suitable conduit for government authority. Successive political agents began attempts to bolster the *jirga* (and thus government authority over it) by creating the *khassadari*, a quasi-tribal police force designed specifically to counter violent and criminal activities within tribal society. Although operating under the authority of the political officer, the *khassadar* was in reality at the *jirga*'s disposal, ready to act upon its pronouncements. In this way the political officer sought not only to empower the *jirga* in its relations with the tribe, in the process encouraging closer identification by the former with government as a matter of self-interest, but also to use the money paid to individual *khassadari* to deepen the reach of government authority into the heart of the tribe, the thinking being that the further such monies penetrated the further the government's influence might reach. And withdrawal of those monies could also act as an effective sanction for misbehaviour. Ultimately the *khassadar* would act as the political officer's own agent within the tribe, a human barometer of its political sentiment.¹⁷

But it was always likely that the political officer's natural desire to establish patronage through tribal service would run up against the hidden, reactive tendencies of the tribal system. First and foremost, the *khassadar* as an instrument of the *jirga* was placed in a difficult position. He might be called upon to take action against members of his own tribe and possibly against the interests of his tribal elders; an unthinkable proposition and one that resulted in a sort of stasis whereby the *khassadar* frequently became a powerless observer of violent and criminal actions.

But other problems were more systemic.¹⁸ The relatively high wages which were designed to make government service attractive meant that *khassadar* duty now became a highly prized objective. So prized in fact that it made recruits beholden to the malik who had selected them, rather than the political officer who was their ultimate authority. The problem was then compounded by the growth of hereditary service. Identifying elements of a particular clan or section as suitable targets for attention, the political officer might then attempt to establish *khassadari* among them in order to develop the desired degree of low-level influence. However, the steady growth of hereditary service within tribes such as the Mahsud and Tori Khel Wazirs, for example, made it difficult to control the distribution of *khassadar* service in order to push money and influence toward those that required it most. Ultimately, the direction and reach of British influence was dictated by the tribal family tree rather than the political agent. The inevitable consequence of such developments meant that, in parts of Waziristan especially, the combination of hereditary succession and Maliki privilege dictated that patronage gravitated away from the political agent, to the extent that pacification policy was being enacted not by British administrators but by tribesmen, with whatever money that was available flowing as prescribed by their own particular preferences.

But problems with using tribal service as a form of influence-building existed even when the structures designed for that purpose sat outside the tribe. The Transfrontier Corps, for example, was the final iteration of a series of initiatives designed to draw the tribes into armed government service. It was a collection of three units: the Kurram Militia, the Tochi Scouts and the South Waziristan Scouts.¹⁹ Numbering some 3,500 men in total, they were commanded by hand-picked officers seconded from the Indian Army. Designed to move quickly over inhospitable terrain and using tribal tactics in battle, the Scouts would comprise the first line of armed defence against significant outbreaks of anti-government violence by the tribes. Cheap, intimately knowledgeable of local society and geography, highly mobile, and able to think along tribal lines, they appeared to hold out the prospect of an effective response to the need for some sort of physical pacifying influence without resorting to the provocative intrusions of the Indian Army. And perhaps most crucially they functioned under the control of the Political Department. This allowed the latter to theoretically tailor this form of paramilitary service to its intended strategic ends, namely to provide a physical totem for both tribesmen and administrator as to the inherent benefits of tribal service as a political force. By drawing tribesmen into paid service by way of enlistment in a prestigious unit, loyalty to the government could be engendered.

That was the ideal. In reality there had always been vocal doubts on the part of some government and military figures as to whether tribesmen in government service could be relied upon in times of acute stress. Paranoia over this issue had infected policymaking since the inception of local militias in the late nineteenth century. These fears had been fully realised on the occasion of the Third Anglo-Afghan War of 1919. Wide-scale desertions by tribesmen in the face of Afghan attack meant that famous units such as the Khyber Rifles were disbanded in their entirety.²⁰ Others, notably the Waziristan militias, were dissolved and reconstituted, but with important differences. Surveying the wreckage of its pre-war tribal policy, i.e. stationing the army outside the tribal areas and maintaining security within through the almost exclusive use of these indigenous forces, the Government of India had sought to reform its methods. The army was now pushed into Waziristan, where it adopted a watchful posture from its enlarged garrison at Razmak.²¹ Day-to-day security would still be the preserve of the Scouts, but recruitment from the dominant Waziristan tribes, the Wazirs and Mahsuds, was halted because of their perceived disloyalty. Men had to be drawn instead from other Pashtun tribes along the length of the frontier. The thinking behind this was understandable in the context of the time, but the effect was unfortunate. By recruiting mainly from the Afridi, Orakzai and Yusufzai, tribes that resided to the north of Waziristan, the Scouts were quickly discerned by the tribes indigenous to Waziristan as being made up of hostile outsiders, no different in important respects to government forces. In turn, political officers found that the mere presence of an instrument that arguably served its purpose across significant parts of the Frontier could not be applied where it was needed most, as the most urgent targets of pacification in Waziristan were unable to distinguish in their own minds between a 'political' force designed to offer them employment and advancement and a military force designed to oppress and punish them. Ultimately one of the potentially most important pacification mechanisms in the Political Department's armoury was denied the ability to function as intended, i.e. as a form of positive engagement with those most bitterly opposed to the British presence. Instead it simply became part of the government's kinetic response to tribal violence.²²

Tier 2: Peaceful Penetration

It was clear that while these instrumental forms of pacification possessed a certain logic in theoretical terms, by the early 1930s they had failed to engineer any material change in the anti-government perspectives that

dominated in places such as Waziristan in particular. From this point forward, the Political Department began to explore more ambitious schemes to deliver peace and stability under the auspices of 'peaceful penetration'. One of the primary manifestations of this was roadbuilding. Despite their long and obvious heritage as a method of extending a military presence into previously impenetrable regions, à la General George Wade's roads of eighteenth-century highland Scotland, the Political Department saw roads as possessing a far more positive pacifying role. By extending them into tribal territories, the government could not only promote the flow of crops, timber and livestock from the tribal areas to markets in the settled areas of the Frontier but also open up the prospect of paid employment for the tribesmen in the form of road construction and maintenance. Economic interdependence and government employment would thus create a civilising impetus.²³ In this way the issue of roads represented the advancement of a far more ambitious argument, centring upon the necessity to pursue the socio-economic development of the Frontier in an effort to address the root causes of violence: poverty and isolation.

The problems were again myriad, however. With respect to roadbuilding, at the precise moment (mid-1931) that the Political Department was finally able to force the government to acknowledge that roads might provide a strategic response to the perennial question of tribal violence beyond mere immediate military utility, the impact of the deep financial recession of the late 1920s and early 30s was biting hard into the latter's coffers.²⁴ Referring specifically to Frontier matters, the Government of India was now forced to admit that its financial position was so problematic that it was obliged to subject every proposal for fresh expenditure to the most drastic criticism, and firmly reject any that did not hold out the prospect of adequate return.²⁵ For those politicals now loudly advancing the 'civilisational' aspect of their designs this was hugely problematic. With the timescale for the wholesale transformation of the tribes' economic circumstances being potentially generational in nature, the quest for peace through economic development now became a purely moral argument that possessed little immediacy and next to no purchase on the government's tightly held purse-strings. The second problem was that the genuine intent of the politicals to see roadbuilding as a matter of aiding economic development was inherently corrupted by the obvious potential for those roads to feature one-way traffic, i.e. military troops and vehicles heading into tribal areas, rather than goods and commodities heading out. It would be a fact that even when the financial pressures began to lift after 1934 and a limited policy of peaceful penetration was given the green light by a still fiscally cautious government, the main

cause of repeated outbreaks of tribal violence was due to roadbuilding, the tribes fearful as to what this might mean for their autonomy.²⁶ It also had an entirely unexpected diplomatic consequence. The Afghan government quickly became concerned that roads acted as a route of advance towards its own border and that tribes unfriendly to the Kabul regime would be afforded the opportunity to advance more rapidly into Afghanistan. As a consequence, British officials in Kabul warned the Political Department that their civilising scheme was likely to lead to provocations among the cross-border tribes by the Afghan government in order to protect the approaches to its border with the NWF. This could lead to even more anti-government turbulence. Peaceful penetration might instead result in a significant increase in violence.²⁷

The roadbuilding strategy of the early to mid-1930s revealed other deeper-rooted problems. At a more elevated level it signified the Political Department's willingness to depart from thinking about pacification purely in terms of the mechanisms of control. This was the point in time that changing social attitudes in India and the metropole began to result in an increasing questioning of the government's willingness to tolerate a state of poverty and violent instability in the tribal areas of the Frontier. It would be the Political Department that would advance to the fore in articulating the vision of the civilising mission, and the extent to which the economic development of the tribes should be a part of that. But when it came to a policy of socio-economic development within the tribal areas, there was a significant gap between elevated ideals and their practical implementation. The vast majority of officials believed that the government had a moral duty to improve the life circumstances of the tribes under its jurisdiction, but closer examination of the problem questioned the basic assumptions at play, i.e. that the indigenous tribal population actually desired what was on offer and that what was on offer was actually beneficial in terms of its pacifying effect. With respect to the former, the strategy of peaceful penetration demanded as its logical corollary that tribes would be presented with a basic *quid pro quo* – economic enrichment at the expense of their autonomy. Should the government *really* have to go to the expense of finding out the potentially obvious answer to that question? Secondly, experience with the allowance system suggested that increasing the flow of money into the tribal areas did not automatically translate into raised living standards and an associated pacifying effect. Indeed, as the Political Department admitted, it often resulted in even more violence, internecine or otherwise, as these funds were directed toward self-protection or anti-government action. Sir George Cunningham, an experienced political who would eventually ascend to the position of chief commissioner of the

NWFP, pointed out that the Mahsuds in particular had contributed heavily to the large Frontier uprising of 1936–7 even though they had seen a distinct rise in their living standards as a result of their heavy involvement in roadbuilding construction contracts.²⁸ The politicals were split. They could pump money into the tribal areas and perhaps see a gradual raising of living standards over the following two decades, or they could risk that money being used to create an even more violent society.²⁹

The same sorts of concerns extended toward other important civilising initiatives, particularly education. Much like similar American initiatives in the Philippines, education was considered a powerful pacifying tool. Consequently, it was argued that a cheap if long-term method of moderating tribal behaviour might be if the seventy-five or so schools then established throughout the five tribal agencies could be significantly increased in number.³⁰ And indeed this would be a popular move: political officers on the ground in Waziristan reported a significant appetite for education. But other concerns dominated within the Political Department. Without checks or controls on what was taught in the school the government could not risk funding anti-government propaganda. But neither could it be seen to be funding anything pro-government, as the school might simply be destroyed in reprisal, thus leading to a diminution in government prestige. Even if this problem was solved, it was argued that the extension of education across the tribal areas schools was dangerous without subsequent useful employment opportunities. As one senior political officer noted, 'The product of a High School who returns to Waziristan unqualified for particular employment is bound to be a source of potential trouble.'³¹ Ultimately it was feared that the net effect of educating tribesmen and then failing to provide adequate employment would have long-term political consequences as tribesmen placed their circumstances and lack of opportunity in a broader context. Consequently, despite their moral and practical benefits, support for educational initiatives waned. Along with the building of roads and the drive toward sustained economic development, the uncertainties over the potential results of any attempts to improve the socio-economic status of the tribal areas caused a form of institutional paralysis among political officers, even those broadly supportive of such initiatives. The civilising mission would remain in stasis until the British departure from the Frontier in 1947.

Cultural Understanding as an Instrument of Peace

The strategies implemented by the Political Department during the interwar period, particularly the period 1931–9, were important for two

reasons. Firstly they represented, in the broader context of a seven-decade-long encounter between tribe and state, the most proactive efforts on the part of the Government of India to solve the problem of anti-government violence during that period. Secondly, they had to all intents and purposes failed. Mindful of course that tribal or subaltern perspectives on the encounter with colonial rule would provide their own explanations for the way in which events transpired, it nevertheless begs the question as to why the political officer concept, i.e. the mechanism detailed by the Government of India to help deliver peace and stability via an unrivalled knowledge of the tribal environment, arguably failed to live up to its promise.³² That question then leads us to consider whether the Frontier political cadre genuinely possessed that unrivalled knowledge. In one obvious sense, of course, they did; no other cadre of officials across Empire or within India had a grasp of the fine detail of the Frontier and its forms of administration. From the 1880s onwards the Political Department had been able to develop a detailed schematic layout of the indigenous tribes by way of tabular and diagrammatical representations of the structural composition of a given clan, estimates as to the population within each clan, the number of 'fighters' that could be raised, and whatever dominant identifiable political leaders could be ascertained at certain levels.³³ This information provided, at a glance, a visual representation of the tribe in terms of its size, power, physical composition and relative political importance. As a technical enterprise it was impressive. It represented the distillation of decades' worth of knowledge and observation and a determination to impose a rigorous, rational, semi-scientific imprint upon the process. And the granularity of detail would be supplemented during the 1930s with the incorporation of airborne photo-reconnaissance. The creation of a tribal intelligence cell, a joint RAF/Political Department initiative, allowed a visual 'map' of each agency – down to individual dwellings – to be constructed in a mosaic-like fashion, complementing the pre-existing tabular records.³⁴ The Frontier's Political Department was thus able to understand the Frontier in detailed schematic and graphic terms. Even in more broadly 'human' terms it still fared relatively well. As an organisation it elevated its analysis above the simplistic. It recognised the tribesmen as political and economic actors in their own right, refusing to believe in monocausal explanations for violence such as culture or religion, preferring instead to understand such outbreaks as occurring for more complicated reasons: competition for resources, broader concerns as to the erosion of autonomy, political meddling by outside influences, and ultimately the basic competition for power and authority between tribe and state. Even the well-publicised religious uprisings on the Frontier were understood as

having their roots in far more prosaic and explicable matters.³⁵ In other words, the ability of politicals to understand and explain the root causes of violence in both regions was more sophisticated than might otherwise be credited. But in a more considered sense their understanding remained highly fragile, particularly when required to enable the furtherance of policy objectives. The political economy of tribal society; the flow of true authority within each tribe; the nature and role of inwardly directed violence; the destabilising effects of money upon individual and group behaviours; the political and diplomatic side effects of 'civilising' efforts – these were highly complex factors against which to apply intrusive methods of active administration, and between them they ask serious questions of the degree of understanding of tribal society possessed by the political officers both corporately and individually. Here is where the matter of 'understanding' really mattered: the ability of political officers to jump from the mere explanation of their surrounds toward a discernible ability to accurately influence tribal behaviours, to draw them more surely into the government's orbit and to create peace.

Partly the issue lay in the variability of the skills and knowledge inherent to the political cadre. Departmental recruitment was made on the basis not of specific suitability to the task, but of indefinable personal qualities backed up by family connections and patronage. If an applicant's ancestor(s) had served as political officers then the chances were that their own application would be successful. The educational background of candidates was firmly rooted in the classics and humanities rather than the nascent fields of social anthropology or ethnology as seen emerging among the political cadre in Nigeria for example. Studies undertaken during training were directed almost exclusively toward revenue and judicial matters, historical texts and policy documents. Language training was undertaken in the candidate's own time, resulting in varying standards of proficiency, but at no point did those destined for the Frontier undertake any meaningful examination of Pashtun society or history prior to their arrival.³⁶ In addition, the Political Department demanded that its officers served limited periods in each agency. Roughly every two years officers would be moved to another part of the Frontier and required to refamiliarise themselves with the specific requirements of that appointment as well as the local prevailing tribal and political mood, and to do so in short order.³⁷ The rationale behind this was understandable: to avoid staleness or over-identification with local elements. But if the average political officer required months to grasp the social and political dynamics within their particular agency then repeated and short-term deployments from one agency to another meant that they would spend a significant proportion of their tenure struggling

to familiarise themselves with the fine detail of their surroundings. The time required to build anything more than a general familiarity with the tribes under one's jurisdiction was denied most officers. Indeed such were the gaps in knowledge that in 1945 one senior political, looking back at the department's activities over the previous decades, remarked,

It is often claimed that some of the British officers who spent many years on the Frontier in the past knew all there was to know about tribal constitution. If they did possess this knowledge, they have left no record of it and there is not in existence today any treatise or manual, official or otherwise, on the subject of the political constitution of the Pathan [*sic*] tribes.³⁸

Difficulties in achieving a proper understanding of tribal society were further complicated by individual reactions to that society. Some developed a romantic attachment to the tribes and the region, a positive sentiment that often led individuals toward a concerted study of the people and their culture.³⁹ Others displayed real antipathy, viewing the tribesmen as fundamentally untrustworthy barbarians. In a debate in 1945 between three senior political officers, the sentiment was expressed by one that the tribes were populated by savages whose main desire was not to be governed by anybody, that the tribal system, which had grown far too powerful, needed to be 'broken' in order for British influence to thrive and that the tribes needed to be starved into submission to make the point.⁴⁰ Perhaps, as Hugh Beattie has previously argued, this was a natural consequence of a gradually increasing divergence between the norms of British/British Indian and tribal society.⁴¹ Yet one cannot disguise the fact that countless of the department's official files and memoranda make references to a primitive society populated by uncivilised savages: xenophobic, fanatical, priest-ridden 'Mohammedans' obsessed with notions of pride, honour and 'face'. So rather than begetting engaged observers of tribal society, exposure to that society could act as a deeply antagonising experience. In some respects, that disillusionment may have been an entirely unavoidable corollary of the mere act of tribal administration. The former Pakistani political officer Akbar Ahmed proposes that models of Pashtun behaviour that accorded with the romantic ideal did exist, but only away from the influences associated with external control. Once in contact with the manipulative machinery of government authority in the form of 'political' administration, forms of behaviour far removed from the honourable ideals of Pashtunwali became apparent. Indeed, Ahmed points to the Pashtun word *potical*, derived from 'political', which has come to connote 'falsehood and deceit' in the tribal mind. Crude politicking abounded as tribesmen exhibited devious and deceitful behaviour in response to their own

manipulation by political officers and their native assistants, a behaviour that stood in stark contrast to the ideals of their society and which led to disillusionment on the part of each side with respect to the other.⁴²

The matter of politicking draws us to perhaps the most important aspect of the question, which was the ability of the Political Department not simply to gather knowledge, but to use it in a constructive fashion for the purpose of reducing violence. The reason why the period 1919–39 is such an interesting one in this respect is the drastic increase during this period of the Political Department's active manipulation of the tribes; a situation that stood firmly at odds with both stated guidelines and broader policy. What appears indisputable is that drawing adventurous and often idealistic young officers into contact with Pashtun society had the inevitable result of encouraging on their part a tendency to meddle in an effort to bolster their own influence and prestige, albeit generally in the context of attempts to further their own government's authority. In this way the more intricate the form of administration that evolved and the more 'professional' the political cadre became, the more noticeable the urge on their part to actively build and exercise influence. Indeed by the late 1930s it had become clear that interference in tribal affairs was not only prevalent among the political cadre but had been elevated to an art form, 'which every political officer is expected to acquire to justify his appointment'.⁴³ Problematically, such activism was taking place without any sort of standing instructions having been promulgated.⁴⁴ Not only were individual approaches inconsistent, but this tendency toward interference became even more problematic when considered against accusations (by their own) that the political cadre were, in reality, largely ignorant of the fine detail of tribal society,

Over time therefore the mere existence of a political cadre encouraged increasingly political forms of behaviour. Yet the subtly reactive responses of the tribes most subject to such behaviours, i.e. those located in Waziristan, meant that they either failed or simply satisfied the interests of the tribe itself. This state of affairs simply reflected the basic problems that British administrators had in trying to comprehend vital aspects of different Pashtun tribal systems: where power lay within, how it shifted rapidly from individual to individual, how new power brokers emerged and then disappeared, and how to control the effects of actions. The British had long found this a problem, one that first rose to prominence with use of the so-called Maliki system in Waziristan in the early 1900s. Designed to funnel government influence through tribal leaders, it required political officers to identify leadership figures within a specific tribe (in this case the Mahsud), classifying them into five grades according to their supposed power and influence – a process which,

considering the inherent complexity and fluidity of Mahsud and Waziri tribal systems, where individuals rapidly attracted and lost authority over their peers, was impossible to achieve with any degree of certainty. The policy was a failure, its primary result being the deaths at the hands of their own of the chosen maliks.⁴⁵ Herein lay the fundamental reality of frontier administration. The apparatus devoted to the task, in the form of political officers operating under a government department dedicated to such matters, implied deep understanding of the subject. But this was questionable beyond a certain degree. And even if a heightened understanding implied the ability to control, actually it often meant nothing of the sort. In reality the ability to exercise some sort of control or influence depended not upon the skill and understanding of the Political Department but upon the political constitution of the tribe in question. If that system tended toward the feudal, with identifiable personalities able to wield genuine authority, as characterised political influence within the Afridi tribe for example, then a limited form of indirect rule was a feasible mechanism for government authority to be pushed directly into the tribe, most often through simple financial transactions. The more democratic the system, however, as was the case in Waziristan, then the more indirect the methods sought and the more vulnerable they became in turn to reciprocal manoeuvring by the tribe in question. Attempts to counter this by strengthening forms of government-sponsored authority, such as the jirga, simply ensured that the tribe would create an alternative power base in order to compensate.

There remains of course another vital consideration in judging the Political Department's effectiveness at instrumentalising its knowledge. If the absence or lessening of violence within the various tribal agencies is used as a suitable metric for success then one is confronted by the age-old problem of judging the extent to which the absence of violence could be directly attributed to the skilful mediations of the various political agents operating among the tribes as opposed to the agency of the tribes themselves. As Condos and Rands illustrate in their examination of the Mahsud's relationship with the British government during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the relationship between the two was reciprocal and negotiated. While the government sought to control, the Mahsud sought in return to mediate, deflect, appropriate and bend colonial intervention to their own interests. Violence and dissent would have been a part of their repertoire – sometimes instinctive, sometimes calculated. And the same for their various modes of cooperation and accommodation. The extent to which British political officers affected those calculations in a positive sense is largely anecdotal, and in truth can only be guessed at.⁴⁶

Civil–Military Relations

That the Political Department was unable to deliver the desired peace and stability on the ground may have been the consequence of certain inherent weaknesses in the British system of tribal administration but risks obscuring the salient point that the politicals were part of a civil–military approach to pacification whereby the alternative security provider, i.e. the Indian Army, possessed a very different perspective of the problem, one that led to frequent clashes between the two over their preferred methods.⁴⁷ But what is perhaps most interesting about that rivalry is that while inherent tensions at play between military and civil actors may have obscured the search for a common approach to tribal affairs, they simultaneously and paradoxically provided the equilibrium required for Frontier administration to function in a more effective fashion than it might have done had either system dominated.

There is no doubt that during the entirety of the British presence there, the Frontier, in the Indian Army's mind, was an arena of war. As such it was suited to the application of military power and encouraged the belief that the application of force to compel submission was the most suitable method of responding to anti-government violence. In the interwar period especially, the Frontier offered British officers and soldiers, as well as their Indian counterparts, the only real and consistent opportunity for combat operations across the entire Empire. Its value in this respect was enhanced by the inhospitable terrain and the prowess of the enemy: to prevail in Frontier warfare was a test of martial skills and fortitude, qualities celebrated in the popular literature of the day.⁴⁸ The army's forcefulness was further encouraged by a combination of factors: the domineering style of some of its senior officers, the belief that the Frontier and the tribes constituted excellent opportunities to blood untrained troops, and the weightier influence of senior generals compared to the Political Service's representatives in government. Yet the mere notion of 'warfare' immediately drew contrast with a civilian political cadre that saw the Frontier primarily as a political arena, one that demanded constant recourse to negotiation, bargaining and compromise. The inevitable tensions that arose from this relationship were well captured in contemporaneous accounts of the delicate balance that characterised the civil–military relationship on the ground. John Masters, an officer in the Indian Army who served on the Frontier during this period, described the dynamic as such:

We, girding for war, heard ourselves being advised by contrapuntal voices. The first, that of military experience in all wars of recorded history, was hard,

unequivocal and merciless. The second voice, that of civil government, was oleaginous, ambiguous – and merciless.⁴⁹

The scene was thus set for a constant clash between two rival perspectives. The army perceived the tribal problem as a purely military problem presenting a set of tactical obstacles whereby the fundamental principles of land warfare – surprise, speed, concentration of force, firepower, lethality – took precedence. In contrast, political officers saw a long-term situation that required active diplomacy, flexibility, time and moderation, not least because they themselves were still required to tread that ground unarmed once hostilities had concluded. Masters' ultimate conclusion was an illuminating one. From his perspective a balance was struck – between the military's outright and unhelpful description of the tribesman as 'the enemy' and the political's equally unhelpful opinion of him as merely 'a misguided fellow citizen'.⁵⁰ Masters' commentary was telling not simply because of its cleverness, but so too because of its balance, its recognition that both parties were half-right. The politicals generally advocated a relaxed perspective that failed to place the Frontier in the wider context of additional and increasingly serious challenges to imperial authority in India proper, while the military were too quick to identify the situation as one of war – which it was not – and needed reminding of that fact. In its own way, the inherent tensions between what might be termed 'inter-agency responsibility', and the sluggish and largely unimaginative policy response that accrued, somewhat bizarrely produced a solution superior to that advocated by the politicals or generals alone. The overall consequence was that the Frontier as a whole witnessed the former largely maintaining control of the narrative, and by far the greater weight of influence in determining policy, except with respect to the violent enclave of Waziristan where they still, however, maintained a fair degree of influence as political advisors to the sizeable military presence. The reason lay in the fact that civilian authority was ultimately safeguarded by the most powerful consideration acting upon the government: its finances. Whatever the differences in conception of the Frontier as an arena of violent competition or delicate politicking, the Government of India, ever alive to the fiscal pressures acting upon its treasury, fully understood the inevitable inflationary consequences of allowing the army to unduly influence Frontier policy on any really significant scale, even if that same army was simultaneously a vital component in allowing the government to lay claim to at least some form of control over the Frontier.

Conclusion

The example of the North-West Frontier perfectly illustrates some of the problems commonly encountered by imperial powers trying to use

'knowledge-based' systems of influence and control among the highly complex societies that they encountered. On the matter of whether British officials fully 'understood' the tribal landscapes of Waziristan, Khyber or Malakand, the question is more complex than first appears. It is beyond doubt that certain individuals developed a highly informed appreciation of their environment. Yet it is also fair to say that a significant proportion of those engaged in 'political' work possessed nothing like this degree of insight. That which they did possess was generally a more schematic comprehension of affairs, a surface knowledge that was more than able to grasp and depict the shape and structure of tribal society but which was largely unable to evolve into a more thorough understanding of the internal dynamics at play, particularly when confronted by anything other than a recognisably feudal or similarly ordered political structure. But perhaps more important was the extent to which what was known would encourage a belief on the part of officials that they could predict and control the effects of their interactions with those societies. This half-knowledge resulted in a marked tendency to believe that the active manipulation of tribal society was not only desirable – a mark of the political officer's worth – but also an entirely feasible method of altering tribal behaviour to suit government interests. Yet the inevitable consequence of such meddling upon such complex and fluid social and political systems was a series of unpredictable behaviours that distorted the intended impact of such measures.

Yet despite the fact that tribal administrators were often unable to wield their influence in the fashion intended, this fails to provide a fully convincing explanation as to why the tribal administration on the Frontier failed to quell repeated instances of violence. Such shortcomings are better explained by acknowledging a far more influential factor, namely the fact that for all their clever designs and often elevated intentions, the political cadre were caught in the midst of an elemental competition between tribe and government – between independence and control – that dominated the narrative at play. The point may appear obvious, but it bears reinforcement. No matter the intelligent schemes designed to formulate human and political relationships with the indigenous population, the political cadre was attempting to navigate an insurmountable obstacle. With tribe and government locked in confrontation, the Political Service's undoubted ability to soften the sharp edges of that dispute could never disguise what the veteran political officer James Acheson had observed, that every piece of terminology used with respect to the tribes was actually a corollary for control.⁵¹ The black-and-white nature of the dispute condemned the political thrice: in the eyes of the tribe, who perceived them as agents of control; in the eyes of a military who frequently questioned whose side they were on; and in the

eyes of government, who perceived their recommendations for forms of economic and social development to be a distraction from the basic task at play, i.e. to engineer a situation that ensured that the government's interests prevailed as and when required.

The question therefore of whether British policy with respect to the Indian Frontier benefited from the elevated levels of cultural understanding developed by the political cadre has to be judged in the context of a more important form of understanding where policymakers were concerned, i.e. ensuring that the minutiae of Pashtun social and political dynamics took their appropriate place among a hierarchy of other competing concerns that came with the territory of administering an empire of hundreds of millions of subjects, stretching from Burma, via the Himalayas, to the Gulf and East Africa. From that perspective, the directionless and confusing nature of British Frontier policy was simply the manifestation of a simple principle, namely a refusal to allow peripheral matters to possess more importance than they ever warranted. It made sense, just not to those on the ground.

5 'Hearts and Minds' vs French Revolutionary War: Algeria 1954–62

'We are officers outside the regular Army structure ... We are neither police commissioners nor combat soldiers. We are something different. Each to his own work. This truth ... the reuniting of minds and souls, the work of pacification, of the SAS.'¹

The British experience on the North-West Frontier had revealed some of the inherent tensions that accompanied the 'political' approach to pacification. Most obvious of these had been the rival perspectives adopted by civilian officials and administrators on the one hand and their military partners on the other. Lurking beneath had been the question of whether the specialists detailed for the purpose of engineering a relationship between the tribes and government were sufficiently qualified to undertake that task, and whether the process was controllable in the way that they believed. And of course there was the extent to which the government was able to place the broader pacification effort in its proper strategic context and whether it could resist the temptation to allow constant challenges to its authority in the tribal areas to distort its attempts to adopt a measured approach to protecting its interests there. The Algerian War of 1954–62 would see a similar range of challenges (re-)emerge, but in far starker, far more problematic and, in the end, far more extreme ways.

The French approach to pacification had, by the time of the Algerian War, long been a curiosity. The elevated conceptual approaches articulated by a number of theorists couldn't disguise or prevent the ready and willing application of violence. The war in Algeria would be the supreme example of this tension. Commencing in November 1954 with a series of isolated armed attacks across the country by militants who gradually coalesced under the flag of the Front Libération Nationale (FLN), their military wing the Armée Libération Nationale (ALN), and the latter's own political wing, the Organisation Political-Administrative (OPA), the conflict grew in scale. By 1960 some 500,000 French troops and nearly 100,000 Algerian loyal irregulars (*Harkis*) would be committed to

ensuring the defeat of a widespread nationalist insurgency and, by extension, the preservation of Algeria's constitutional status as part of France.² Militarily the French were successful. By 1958 they had gutted the FLN's urban operations and leadership cadre in the capital, Algiers. The subsequent 'Challe' offensive of 1959–60 largely eradicated its armed units throughout rural Algeria. Military victory had been achieved albeit at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Algerian dead. But the campaign's embrace of increasingly violent and illegitimate methods ensured a gradual but inescapable loss of political and moral capital by the French government. Combined with the wearying expense and indeed ultimate lack of logic in preserving French control of Algeria during the era of decolonisation, the result was inevitable. Algeria's independence was eventually granted by de Gaulle's Fifth Republic in July 1962 over the heads of a violently disillusioned French military, a segment of which would subsequently wage a retributive campaign of terrorism across Algeria and metropolitan France, culminating in de Gaulle's attempted assassination in August of that year.³

The violent corruption of the French pacification effort in Algeria draws to the fore a number of important frictions that affected (and indeed continue to affect) the application of 'culturally informed' counterinsurgency. In the first instance it relied upon more than simply developing a deep understanding of the ground-level environment in which French forces operated. In truth the complex attempt to blend 'political' and military approaches relied more fundamentally upon an accurate understanding both of the nature of the conflict and the utility of both of those approaches. This was the form of understanding that perhaps mattered most. Importantly in the case of Algeria, while the civic actions teams of the SAS sought to frame their response to the FLN rebellion as speaking to the methods of historic colonial-era luminaries, the French army arrived in theatre polluted not only by its scarring experience in Indochina but in thrall to a theory of insurgency that would act as a countervailing force to any notion of pacification by 'development' or empathy with the local population. As a consequence, while the SAS and their civilian overlords envisaged political warfare as a process by which the war was waged through predominantly political actions, the military preferred to understand the concept as one where war sufficed as its own form of politics. Secondly there was the way in which events played out on the ground. Seductive in their confirmation to observers of the absolute appropriateness of military thinking, they correspondingly undercut rival 'political' methods. Thirdly there was the overestimation by proponents of the 'enlightened' approach, as to how their idealistic and aspirational method of pacification could effect

enough positive change within Algerian society to ensure that it remained servile to French strategic interests. Lastly and perhaps most pertinently was the way in which the 'political' method, although standing in stark contrast to the brutality of the military effort, in and of itself lacked any real logic. No matter its supposedly enlightened principles, the objectives that it sought were anything but. Such contradictions would be blatantly clear to those ordinary Algerians that were the target of its efforts

The SAS: Structure and Purpose

The French pacification effort in Algeria was a schizophrenic affair. On one side of this divide stood an intellectual tradition drawn from the teachings and methods of Gallieni and Lyautey in particular: a tradition that advocated combined civil-military action in order to facilitate forms of economic, political and societal development, and which demanded close understanding of (and engagement with) native society with a view to its gradual elevation and modernisation according to French ideals. On the other side stood a French military that increasingly viewed the war in Algeria as a zero-sum struggle in which negotiation, moderation and accommodation – the supposed basis of effective political warfare – would be seen as guarantees of French defeat.

This dispiriting narrative was not an inevitability, however. In 1955 the French stood ready to model their approach to pacification in Algeria along the lines articulated by their earlier colonial theorists. Liberal ideals, the promotion of close engagement with the local population in order to foster deep socio-cultural understanding, and a concerted policy of economic, social and political development would all set the ground for pro-French sentiment and values to spread throughout Algeria, thereby undermining the FLN's appeal for violent resistance to French colonial administration. This civilian 'political' strategy was visualised as the supported element, with the army providing the opportunity for such evolutions to occur in a safe and secure environment, free from violent interference. The twin-track civil-military approach would represent the ideal blend of inducement and coercion (with the former to the fore) required to dampen nationalist sentiment and preserve Algeria as part of France. The undertaking of the political mission on the ground would be the responsibility of the SAS.⁴

The SAS was formed in September 1955 under the orders of Jacques Soustelle, then governor general of Algeria. To all intents and purposes this was Soustelle's response to what he perceived as an ineffective and counterproductive attempt by the military by that point to quash the FLN's increasingly widespread albeit pinprick campaign of violence.

He proposed a strategy of accommodation whereby repression and large unit operations, which he regarded as actively counterproductive, were curtailed.⁵ The emphasis instead would be placed upon a set of administrative and economic reforms that would begin to address the gross inequalities that existed between the settler and Muslim populations, thus removing the resentment that fuelled the FLN rebellion. Additionally he opened secret negotiations with Muslim leaders in both the moderate nationalist and more radical FLN camps in an effort to explore alternatives to a deepening civil war.⁶ Ultimately Soustelle proposed a vision of the war in Algeria as one of negotiation that could only be won by meaningful engagement with the population and on the basis of some form of political accommodation. Only then could ordinary Algerians be brought back into the French political fold. Acting under the auspices of the civilian Office of Algerian Affairs, the SAS was to comprise a key component of this political strategy. Modelled heavily upon the Indigenous Affairs (AI) teams that had been operating in Morocco from 1908 to 1954, the SAS would be charged with recasting the relationship between ordinary Algerians and French rule by pursuing a blend of civic and political action undertaken by teams of operatives living and working within the local population. They would aid the transformation of Algerian society to one more accommodating of the values of a modern post-war state.⁷

At first glance the newly created SAS gave little clue as to its ambitious objectives. In many ways it was nothing more than a civil-affairs unit divided into small teams and distributed throughout rural Algeria. Operating under the auspices of a civilian administrative organ each SAS *section* on the ground was part of a chain of command that began with a team leader (*capitaine*) drawn from military service and culminated with the civilian *sous-préfet* of each of the (ultimately) fifteen *départements* in Algeria, himself reporting to the prefect and ultimately the governor general. To ensure a common line of approach with the military a parallel hierarchy was established with a military representative at each level mirroring their civilian counterpart, until the two theoretically came together in the form of the SAS team on the ground. The team itself, led by the *capitaine*, was supported by a lieutenant or senior NCO and fleshed out by a number of civilian contract workers who fulfilled the roles of interpreters, clerks, drivers and radio operators, and some thirty to forty Algerian irregulars (*Maghzen*). The SAS section and its *Maghzen*, totalling around fifty personnel, would generally be housed within local centres of habitation so as to allow them to engage as closely as possible with the local population. Numbering 192 teams and 397 officers by the end of the first year of its employment, the SAS would

eventually number around 700 teams and 1,287 officers at its maximum strength in the early 1960s.⁸ The SAU (Section Administrative Urbaine), a much smaller sister unit built along similar lines to the SAS and consisting of about 20 teams, operated in metropolitan areas.⁹

Despite its quasi-military structure and functional role within the French colonial administrative apparatus the SAS was from the very beginning possessed of a markedly idealistic tone, one that spoke directly to the ambitious intellectual and spiritual precepts of historic French pacification theory. As the Department of Algerian Affairs put it, the SAS would contribute 'through the use of emotions and reason to the transformation of the local population towards French moral values and material development'.¹⁰ Soustelle, himself a trained anthropologist, proposed that the SAS's role was, 'not a matter of reconquering territory, but of reconquering souls'.¹¹ Such evocative imagery was emphasised by General Georges Parlange, the former Moroccan IA officer initially tasked by Soustelle with assessing the need for a similar organisation in Algeria. Parlange had proposed that 'Any material conquest [of Algeria] must be accompanied by the conquest of souls ... to conquer souls, one must first multiply contacts with the people'.¹² General François Partiot, inspector general of the Office of Algerian Affairs in 1959–60 described the job of the SAS as to 'elevate the man', to promote in him those moral, intellectual and material qualities that might draw him to France 'by heart, and by reason'.¹³ For Commander Paul Benos, an early director of SAS training, the pacification effort was designed to eliminate 'the physical and intellectual misery which afflicts the seven-tenths women and men of this country'. Ultimately, he believed, the organisation and control of Algeria's population would allow the transformation within of a French mentality by way of '[a]ctions upon their mind, their souls'.¹⁴

It is clear that the senior leadership of the SAS was motivated by a series of deeply romantic principles from which the organisation sought to frame its approach towards recasting the broken relationship between Algeria's Muslim population and French rule. Its method would be facilitated by one simple principle: 'proximity'. Each section was to live within local communities and so became the physical manifestation of French authority. From that were to follow a series of familiar population-centric pacification methods that sought to identify and address a range of sociopolitical concerns perceived to lie at the root of the insurgency. Charged in particular with addressing matters of socio-economic inequality, SAS personnel were to engage in various forms of ground-level activism such as the provision of healthcare and education, building and construction, the disbursement of allowances and benefits, and the lending of credit for local economic initiatives. SAS teams sought

to stimulate the formation of civil associations of various kinds (youth groups, women's groups, veterans societies) that combined recreational facilities with attempts to promote discussion and group activities, as well as social welfare activities (housing, food and clothing), and agricultural reform and improved animal husbandry techniques to compensate for large scale movement of rural population to urban areas.¹⁵ Within those increasingly heavily populated towns and city slums (*bidonvilles*) the sister-unit SAU would undertake similar initiatives, providing work and housing, strengthening social services, and sponsoring labour unions in an effort to mobilise support for the French cause.¹⁶ There were a series of intelligence related functions too, both 'atmospherics' as well as operational intelligence. This capability was provided through the Maghzen as well as the SAS presence within the community and was designed to provide a constant stream of information relating to the state of public opinion and its respective disposition towards the French and the FLN, as well as detailed appreciations of opposing local forces. Indeed, the provision of both general and detailed intelligence was one of the capabilities that the French authorities consistently prioritised.¹⁷ Then there were more distinctly 'political' tasks, such as the identification and co-option of local authority figures and power brokers into French-sponsored administrative roles within local and regional government, at the mayoral level in particular, and subsequent support and advice so as to allow them to effectively discharge their local government roles. This was designed to restore faith among the local population in the ability of the French state to satisfy their need for a political voice, as well as drawing more influential indigenous actors into the French state's own political orbit, thus undercutting the FLN's claim that it alone could provide ordinary Algerians with the necessary representation in the face of colonial oppression.¹⁸ And lastly there was the role played by the SAS within the strategy of *regroupement*. Ostensibly designed as a method by which ordinary Algerians could be 'separated' from the FLN by locating them within purpose-built camps and villages, the SAS used this opportunity to try to 'westernise' the new inhabitants by virtue of civic design methods that mimicked Western town planning, and exposing them to new forms of economic and agricultural activity fit for a modern Western economy.¹⁹

Across this range of activities the SAS was thus set to contribute in a vital fashion to the French objective: not simply to keep control of Algeria but to do so by helping to modernize its society, cultivating an indigenous political elite and encouraging ordinary Algerians to take their place in a more technologically advanced and socially liberal world order. And there was no doubt that the FLN was worried at their potential effect in

this regard, perceiving these political warriors to be an 'iron fist in a velvet glove'.²⁰ The fundamental problem for the French however and one which would persist throughout much of the campaign would be their ability to create a theory of action that allowed this civilian 'political' approach to make sense of its place within a pacification campaign that blurred the lines between political and military activities and responsibilities, and placed the SAS in close proximity to a military partner that perceived the same conflict in starkly different terms.

French Revolutionary War

For Western students of counterinsurgency perhaps the most significant name to emerge from the Algerian War was that of a youthful-looking, middle-ranking army officer by the name of David Galula. His writings on the nature of insurgency and the requirement for a new kind of 'population-centric' response have not only become a key part of the COIN canon but were hugely influential in the subsequent development of FM 3-24 in 2005–6.²¹ But the publication of his work well after the Algerian War's end dictated that his concepts had little influence on its actual conduct. In this respect his significance as a theorist during the conflict was entirely overshadowed by that of possibly the most important military thinker of France's Algerian War, namely Colonel (later General) Charles Lacheroy. And it is Lacheroy, and indeed the French army of the 1950s, that is of most interest in explaining the military's desire to frame the conflict in such oppositional terms to their 'political' partners.

Lacheroy's theory of *la guerre révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary War) was the powerful alter ego of the SAS's 'political' pacification effort in Algeria. In total contrast to the theories outlined by Soustelle, it spoke in sinister, conspiratorial terms of a form of total 'subversive' war, one that had its roots in the Communist revolution of 1917 in Russia and in the subsequent Communist victories of 1949 and 1954 in China and Indochina respectively.²² The latter, of course, had been the site of France's most recent humiliation by the forces of North Vietnamese national liberation. Lacheroy and his growing number of adherents perceived Algeria, in the context of the FLN's rebellion against French rule, as a refinement of the Communist way of war experienced there: an increasingly ideologically mobilised society under the control of a committed insurgent leadership waging a form of 'total war'. The theory of total war subscribed to the notion that warfare had now been transformed by Communist revolution from being temporally and geographically confined, and clearly distinct from a state of peace, into something

permanent, universal and truly 'total' in nature. Over time, it was argued, the FLN's adoption of 'total war' would provide the wherewithal to engineer the orderly transition from isolated instances of insurrection to a large-scale and ultimately victorious confrontation not only against French colonial rule but, in the context of a global offensive, against metropolitan France itself.²³

By 1956 the rapid growth in the popularity and influence of revolutionary war theory, particularly at the École de Guerre and at the army's Centre for Training and Preparation in Counter-Guerrilla (CIPCG) at Arzew, near Oran, dictated that the civilian-led pacification effort in Algeria that had only begun in late 1955 was now confronted by a 'military' perspective that understood the conflict in Algeria in an entirely different way. For if anti-colonial insurgencies were now an integral aspect of this insidious form of 'long-game' warfare, then traditional and existing methods of addressing such threats, such as those advocated by the SAS, had to be radically altered in order to succeed. In the words of Jacques Hogard, one of Lacheroy's early disciples, 'It is up to us ... to learn from the enemy, to consent to transformations and sacrifices indispensable to our security, and to forge the new tactics which will bring victory.'²⁴ A victory moreover that *had* to be won given the fact that this new form of war now posed an existential threat to France itself. Hogard's analysis was disturbing. The traditional methods by which France had conceptualised and addressed challenges to its authority in the colonial arena required fundamental adjustment. Accommodation was a guarantee of defeat, reflective of a dynamic whereby 'the real chiefs of the movement ... envisage negotiation only as a means to increase their prestige and their influence over the populations ... Negotiation ... accelerates the process of the revolutionary war.'²⁵ This demanded in return an uncompromisingly offensive response, one that brooked little in the way of moderation or compromise. Led by veterans of Indochina who were now steeped in this theory of Revolutionary War it demanded a move away from the art of persuasion, where the objective was to improve the economic circumstances and life chances of target communities. The subject was now an object, one to be fought over in a war of manipulation and coercion.²⁶

Pacification vs Revolutionary War

That the civilian method of enlightened pacification was under threat from the rival military theory of Revolutionary War was a fact. But how was the latter able to grip the military psyche to such effect? And how would it so easily displace the 'political' approach in defining the tone of

the French campaign in Algeria? There is no single explanation, but among the various factors at play were: a series of organisational and cultural factors relating to the French army's self-identity and self-interest; the powerful tendency for military commanders to equate the success of military actions in counterinsurgency as reflective of the success of the campaign as a whole; and the influence upon the campaign of two key incidents, the Philippeville Massacre of September 1955, and the collapse of the Fourth Republic in May 1958, both of which played heavily into military hands. But the civilian political approach would also be damaged by the inherent weaknesses of the SAS mission in both theoretical and practical terms

With respect to the French army, there is no doubt that the experience of Indochina exerted a tremendous influence upon the way in which many French soldiers, veterans of that campaign, now interpreted the war in Algeria. The notion of a peculiarly Communist form of war allowed them to make sense of their humiliating defeat by the Viet Minh and provided a unifying logic to what they were seeing in Algeria.²⁷ But as some perceptive observers have noted, Revolutionary War theory didn't simply provide the French army with a powerful rationale for war, or an effective guide to counterinsurgency. In those respects its importance was almost secondary. The true importance of Revolutionary War theory was that it spoke to particular concerns and conceits of the military establishment as a whole. Individually it gave its proponents a special place within the army, while corporately it gave the army a special position within France. It served to reassert France's vision of itself as a global player because, if Communist insurrection was global in nature, then France's response had to be global in scope. It thus bestowed upon the French military the responsibility in defence of their own empire for the defence of the West as a whole. Revolutionary War theory offered to make the French the pre-eminent exponents of a form of war – counterinsurgency – that its proponents claimed mattered more than any other in this stage of the Cold War. In other words its real value to the military was as much a matter of institutional and national self-interest as it was an intellectual response – misguided or otherwise – to what was happening in Algeria.²⁸

It also mattered because when stripped of its nonsensical interpretation of past and present it was an invitation for the army to frame the war in Algeria as a binary, zero-sum contest. If negotiation and accommodation was a backward step leading inevitably to defeat, then the corresponding logic was that the physical destruction of the armed insurgency was key to victory. So as Colin Jackson illustrates, while the French military's approach never satisfied the overblown theoretical precepts

demanding by Lacheroy, Hougard, Nemo et al., the depiction by such individuals of the threat as being existential in nature played neatly into the hands of those who argued the merits of large-scale, coercive major combat operations as a way to physically eradicate the FLN and with it the insurgency.²⁹ Again, this wasn't simply a considered difference of opinion as to the most appropriate route to success. The proffered vision of counterinsurgency as a violent contest to the death played to the French army's self-identity as a warrior class, its emotional commitment to French Algeria, its tactical and operational proficiencies, and its institutional interests in terms of resourcing.³⁰ So powerful were these various influences upon the army's understanding of the war and its role therein that any attempt to sideline it in favour of a predominantly civilian, non-kinetic strategy of accommodation and patient negotiation was almost inevitably doomed to failure. Senior SAS officers were aware of this; they knew that grassroots community work and administrative tasks were not accepted by the army as a valid employment of its time and training, and that it viewed the SAS and its mission as a distraction from the waging of war.³¹ But their position was weak not only because they proposed a theory of action that ran contrary to important aspects of French military self-identity as well as the corporate interests of the services, but because the military's violently uncompromising approach appeared to be succeeding. The battle of Algiers in February–October 1957, undertaken by the tough 10th Parachute Division and its numerous veterans of the Indochina campaign, may have featured a systemic campaign of torture, detention, extra-judicial killing, psychological warfare and false flag operations to unravel and ultimately destroy the FLN presence in that city but their actions resulted in the first clearly definable French victory of the war. This by extension gave validity to the army's military-centric approach which would ultimately find its fullest expression in the Challe Plan of 1959–60, which saw an inflation of troop numbers toward nearly 600,000 and the relentless use of large-scale, dynamic, kinetic strike operations aimed at delivering the total destruction of the armed insurgency, an objective that would largely be completed by late 1960 when the FLN's armed campaign had to all intents and purposes been defeated.³²

The strength of the military's hand in forcing a wider acceptance of its rival vision of war had not simply been reliant upon repeated tactical successes, however. It had still required politicians, both in Algeria and in France, to accept the validity of the proposition firstly that this was an existential struggle and secondly that negotiation spelled defeat. And its position in this respect had been strengthened immeasurably by two events: the Philippeville Massacre, and the political aftermath of the

battle of Algiers. The shocking events at Philippeville/El Halia in late 1955, in which unarmed French settlers including women and children were brutally murdered and mutilated by FLN fighters, was the first serious blow to the prospects of a political approach to the war. The gruesome nature of the killings had been reflective of a deliberate intent by the FLN leadership to toxify the conflict by pushing both sides to extremes of behaviour, thus removing any basis for accommodation. The strategy was a roaring success. The French troops that stumbled upon the desecrated bodies at El Halia went on an immediate killing spree in which the guilt of hundreds of captives was simply assumed as a matter of fact. Similar atrocities were carried out by army units across the country. Meanwhile French settlers, charged with naked fear, lynched any Muslims they could get their hands on. The subsequent death toll among the native Algerian population numbered in the thousands.³³ The events at Philippeville and El Halia not only supercharged the animosity between French settlers and their Muslim neighbours but reinforced at a crucial stage the army's narrative of the existential nature of the conflict. Such was the impact of the events at Philippeville/El Halia on the nature of French official opinion that Soustelle, until then the chief advocate of a policy of patient negotiation with the FLN and close engagement where possible with Algeria's Muslim population, now lost all influence in the face of a military command that advocated the physical destruction of the insurgency as the most urgent requirement.³⁴ Within months of the SAS beginning their mammoth task of engineering a favourable relationship between ordinary Algerians and French rule, the head of the civilian administration to which they reported was essentially *persona non grata*.

From that point forward, the army's sense of exuberance and strength would have significant implications. In the first instance it would empower commanders to attempt to dictate national policy in respect to the war by withdrawing support for Guy Mollet's Fourth Republic. The latter's collapse in May 1958 and de Gaulle's assumption of the presidency meant that the generals now had both their 'man' and their mandate to properly win the war. The battle for Algiers was concluded later that year in a flurry of brutal actions and attention turned toward refining the techniques needed to destroy the remainder of the insurgency in Algeria's vast hinterland, by way of the Challe Plan. The secondary consequence of this turn toward uncompromising military action was the SAS's removal from what had, been, theoretically at least, a joint civil-military enterprise. While the SAS continued to speak of the spiritual and economic development of the Algerian people, the army now spoke even more intently of a campaign of 'annihilation', their

confidence enhanced by what seemed to be the full support of their government.³⁵ On the ground, a glaring disconnect between SAS cadres and their military colleagues became increasingly evident. After May 1958, reports from the Office of Algerian Affairs began to note how SAS officers detected an increasingly visceral rejection of their role and methods by the army. There had always been question marks over whether the military fully understood the SAS role but, it was argued, recent events meant that the latter now felt emboldened enough to detach themselves from the 'hated' civilian administration, rarely integrating the latter into their actions.³⁶ The result was a sense of deep unease among the SAS, but at the same time a recognition that the debate was complex. Acting hand-in-hand with the military in order to best influence its actions and to persuade them of the rightness of the political approach risked the SAS not only being observably connected to the military campaign but perceived as part of a repressive instrument of rule, something that cut against the very nature of their mandate. On the other hand, freeing the SAS from any military duty and restricting them to civilian-administrative functions would potentially diminish their prestige and authority among those elements of the local population who wavered in their loyalties.³⁷

Nevertheless, despite these concerns, the events of 1958 and the seeming success of the subsequent Challe Plan dictated that by the following year the SAS had been removed from any overt or prominent role in the campaign against the FLN and transformed into a purely administrative unit responsible for schools, medical services and advising local mayors in the basic techniques of public administration.³⁸ Their role would now be not to combat the insurgency *per se*, as they had originally been set up to do in conjunction with their military partners, but to act as administrative functionaries servicing the demands of de Gaulle's newly formulated Constantine Plan; a vast developmental effort intended to act as an economic accompaniment to the counterinsurgency campaign.³⁹ The latter, to all intents and purposes, was now exclusively the preserve of the military.

Flaws

The issues outlined above were some of the powerful external factors that affected the ability of the French to fight a properly 'political' war as envisaged by Soustelle in 1955. Even had his vision survived contact, however, there were also a series of internal impediments, with powerful forces acting against him. These were, in no particular order, the increasingly weak degree of institutional expertise within the SAS; its inability to

properly instrumentalise the political line of approach in the manner envisaged by its proponents; and perhaps most importantly the inability of their methods and actions to compensate for the essential illegitimacy of French objectives in the eyes of the target population

Much like the Indian Political Service, the SAS was an 'elite' organisation, at the beginning at least. The majority of volunteers were career officers or reservists from all three services, often drawn from noted academic institutions. Many would later be destined for elevated positions in politics, diplomacy or the Church. Training for their peculiar brand of pacification was – at the outset at least – rigorous. Those selected as potential team leaders were required to undertake around nine months' instruction on a variety of matters relating to colonial administration in a specifically Algerian context. The country was studied at various levels, particularly with respect to its history, geography, population and resources.⁴⁰ This was supplemented by detailed tuition on administrative and judicial institutions and organisation. This period of instruction would then be followed by a further month of language training and academic presentations. The latter were provided by a combination of military officers and local officials – '*officers supérieurs d'arrondissement*' – who were regarded as having extensive knowledge of Algerian affairs. Much of the detailed academic training was provided by the Centre for Advanced Studies in Muslim Administration (Centre des Hautes Etudes Administration Muslmane, or CHEAM), based in Algiers.⁴¹ Somewhat similar to the colonial administrator training courses set up by the British in the interwar period at Oxford, Cambridge and the London School of Economics, CHEAM provided experts in Islamic studies from various backgrounds: historians, linguists, civil servants, diplomats, members of the military and of the Islamic clergy. Each shared their experiences and theories on colonised countries and the different administrative, social or economic measures that might be appropriate for Algeria. More senior SAS officials not only attended CHEAM for a three-month training period but would frequently return to teach and lecture having completed their training. Ultimately, CHEAM's presence within the training architecture of the campaign in Algeria during the mid- to late 1950s illustrated the way in which the French sought to combine, in a highly permeable fashion, the expertise of academics, civil servants and soldiers in a way that might offer something of genuine quality to those charged with the mission of reprising French authority in Algeria.

Such was the ideal. The reality, in the context of a rapidly expanding organisational effort in the midst of a perceived emergency, was rather less impressive. Inevitably, the scale and pace of the SAS's growth

quickly began to militate against the provision of detailed and lengthy periods of instruction. Vulnerabilities in this respect had already become apparent when the small cadre of experienced Arabic- and Berber-speaking Indigenous Affairs (AI) officers drawn from prior service in Morocco, and who comprised the basis of the SAS in its first year of operation, began to be outnumbered by a much younger and far less experienced type of officer. The newcomers may have been intellectually able but they possessed little practical knowledge of North African politics and society, their understanding in this respect coming mainly by way of classroom instruction. Their grasp of basic administrative duties was often poor, as, importantly, were their language skills. The final month of administrative training meant in reality only some forty hours of instruction, partly by correspondence. The Office of Algerian Affairs estimated that only around 20 per cent of its officers possessed any form of competent language skills that freed them from reliance upon their interpreters. Of the rest, 60 per cent knew some basic Arabic, while 20 per cent knew none at all.⁴² The degree to which the rapid pace of SAS expansion began to undermine pacification efforts is exemplified by the stark differences in the quality and duration of training provided to two recruits, lieutenants de Vivre and Maillard in July 1956 and September 1958 respectively. The former was given the opportunity to work with the SAU in the casbah for two months prior to eight months of further academic and practical training, part of which was undertaken at CHEAM. Upon the completion of this ten-month period of familiarisation and training, he took command of an SAS unit. In contrast, the sum total of Maillard's training consisted of a four-day language course during which he was taught how to fire a gun, and two short visits: to an SAS unit and an *autodefensa*.⁴³ The end result was a rapid diminution of skills. The typical SAS officer was acknowledged by even the most senior personnel within the organisation as jack of all trades who would have to suffice until more qualified personnel could be found.⁴⁴

One potential way of mitigating these diminishing standards, particularly with respect to language skills and local environmental awareness, was to open recruitment to Algerian-born officers. But despite the French army's long tradition of drawing from among native populations for the purposes of recruitment into its colonial armies, and despite the incorporation of native Maghzen as a fundamental component of the broader SAS team structure, the numbers of native Algerian SAS officers, i.e. the team leaders in charge of engaging with the local population, was negligible. The result, as one observer noted, was not only an inability to draw upon the insights of locally born officers in contact with the Algerian population but the subsequently highly problematic image

of the SAS – drawing as it did from the heavily Catholic traditions of the French military – as being from the outset a '[white] Christian control body exercising influence over a Muslim population'; a charge from which any pacification effort struggled to recover. It was certainly a problem noted by the Algerian army officer Lieutenant Abdelkader Rahmani, whose 1959 book *The Case of Algerian Officers* lamented the refusal of the French authorities to use native-born officers as the spearhead of any mediation between France and Algeria. The response of the authorities in Algeria was to ban its publication.⁴⁵

Compounding the problem of what were often rank (and unrepresentative) amateurs pitched into the heart of a complex pacification campaign were a number of factors that had similarly affected the use of British political officers on the Indian frontier. The first was a perennial problem affecting the use of individuals such as these, where knowledge was built over time. For SAS officers, that time was limited by terms of service that restricted their deployment in Algeria to around two years. Even for experienced individuals this was barely long enough to generate the sort of detailed comprehension of subtle, more long-term shifts in the political condition of village, rural or tribal life. And if individuals were forced to learn their trade quickly in such an unforgiving environment, matters were rendered even more problematic by the fact that, again like British politicals on the Frontier, there was no formal doctrine guiding their employment. As one SAS officer noted, '[d]uring the war in Algeria there was no written document on the SAS, on the function or the written rules of the Bureaux (sic)'. Another observed that, '[t]here was a lack of doctrine on pacification. At each level down from the Governor down there is a lack of understanding.' Yet another gave a clue as to the reality of SAS engagement in Algeria: '[T]here is no definition of the SAS mission. We do whatever we can, whatever we figure out, wherever we are.'⁴⁶ The consequences of such laissez-faire attitudes were genuinely problematic in practical terms. Firstly, team leaders, the only members of a forty- to fifty-strong SAS team theoretically equipped with the panoply of skills required to turn the pacification effort from ideal to reality, became responsible for dictating the entire team's approach to that end. Secondly, as Paret observed, individual motivations in this respect were often highly variable. Faith in social (re)construction may have been the unifying concept underpinning SAS activities but that did not necessarily reflect the attitudes of its officers. Those that believed that rebellion could be defeated through purely political and economic means were joined by those who simply distrusted the army's methods, while others saw SAS service as a form of 'inner emigration', away from the dilemmas of a war that they could not fully support, or simply as a more

sophisticated form of adventure than regular military service.⁴⁷ None of this encouraged the adoption of an institutional method.

Sending poorly trained personnel with little sense of their own mission into the midst of a bitter civil war was further complicated by the state of 'under-administration' that characterised French colonial rule in Algeria during the 1950s. The term refers to the measurement of three criteria: the density of military/administrative coverage, the ability to mobilise resources, and the ability to adapt to the operating environment. Broadly speaking, the weaker the ability of the colonial power to satisfy the demands of each, the greater the state of under-administration.⁴⁸ The sudden outbreak of violence in 1954 and the collapse of colonial structures, i.e. police, administrative and judicial authorities in rural areas in particular, had revealed this chronic problem throughout much of colonial Algeria. In large part, it was simply the inevitable consequence of a conscious choice, i.e. the unwillingness of the French government to undertake the systematic penetration and control of all levels of Algerian society over the previous century. It also reflected a belief that 'light-touch' indirect rule satisfied the competing ideologies and criteria of the military, colonists and metropolitan elites respectively. But the consequence was like falling into an administrative vacuum.⁴⁹ That lack of prior effort may have reflected the complexities of French policy in Algeria in the past, but its effect at the outbreak of hostilities in 1954 was to create the narrative, in the minds of ordinary Algerians, of this new French pacification effort as simply being a reactive strategy designed to mollify sentiment rather than one aimed at delivering lasting change. It also placed immense pressure on SAS cadres now forced to reverse this state of under-administration from a sudden standing start. As one observer noted, the immensity of the economic, social, administrative and moral problems of contemporary Algeria promised such a daunting task for the SAS that it caused many within the organisation to doubt their own ability to effect change.⁵⁰

The requirement for the SAS to commence ambitious forms of social engineering without the possibility of building upon identifiable – let alone established and workable – systems of district-level administration as existed in Tunisia and Morocco, and the environmental understanding that might come with such systems, was hugely debilitating, particularly as the precepts of population-centric pacification demanded certain basic types of information for it to function correctly as a doctrine. The accurate identification of individuals and the subsequent provision of identity cards, for example, theoretically allowed the authorities to differentiate between farmer and militant, while a census of livestock and grain allowed the possibility of identifying those who might

be supplying the insurgency with food and other forms of logistical support.⁵¹ At a practical level however the need to rapidly gather such information, particularly that relating to the physical identification and monitoring of the local populace, was highly problematic. Essentially the SAS found itself tasked with eliciting information that an indigenous population previously untouched by French administration simply did not recognise as valid or important. Patronymic surnames, the ubiquity of the male first name Mohammed, similar and multiple variations of other first names, the lack of birthdates, widespread illiteracy that prevented the use of signatures, the refusal of women to be photographed or of men to acknowledge their existence to the authorities; these obstructions thoroughly frustrated attempts to gather basic personal information.⁵² Economic data was just as elusive. A desire not to be taxed dictated that the vast majority of those queried denied, understated or camouflaged their assets. Maillard's weary depictions of trying to elicit even the most rudimentary information relating to numbers of children and livestock may have been quasi-comic in nature, but such frictions were immensely frustrating, hindering attempts to build the necessary picture of the socio-economic aspects of local life as demanded by pacification doctrine.⁵³ Official reports tried their best to mask or even ignore these difficulties, but the paucity of basic information of this sort stood in stark contrast to that which had previously been gathered by the Arab Bureaux, and which had been the focus of more recent efforts by AI officers in neighbouring Morocco.⁵⁴ But perhaps the biggest problem confronting the SAS was what happened once it had overcome the time-consuming difficulty of building the necessary picture of local life that would allow the commencement of its proposed schemes of engagement with that population. Here, the problematic nature of pacification in terms of unrealistic objectives and unforeseen outcomes began to reveal itself.

Examples of this sort could be seen in three spheres of activity: attempts to engage more closely with the female population; the provision of education; and the provision of medical services. The determination to 'liberate' Algerian women from what appeared to be an oppressive, patriarchal system across much of the country was a *sine qua non* of French pacification efforts. Algeria's unique status as part of France dictated that, where possible, metropolitan values had to apply to both countries equally. Particular emphasis therefore was paid to the mobilisation of the female portion of the Algerian Muslim population. This was done through the creation of women's groups, and female-only work schemes and meeting places. The obvious inability of male SAS officers to partake in any such activities resulted in the creation of a

number of women-only contingents in the form of the *Equipes Médico-Sociales Itinerantes* (EMSI). Attached to SAS teams and comprising nurses, social workers and teachers, EMSI personnel were supposed to engage with Algerian women and draw them to the French cause by way of hygiene, healthcare and child-rearing workshops.⁵⁵ But what may have been a well-meaning and enlightened attempt to advertise the inherent benefits of French values for the benefit of ordinary Algerians, and ordinary Algerian women in particular, meant in reality a direct assault upon conservative sensibilities, particularly in the rural areas, that was bound create the image of an attempt to undermine the very foundations of that country's social and religious order. This was particularly the case where women provided the bedrock of domestic labour and where arranged marriage was used to solidify clan and family ties. As Porch observes, both Gallieni and Lyautey would no doubt have advised the SAS on the potential for 'cultural catastrophe' where interference with indigenous gender relationships was concerned.⁵⁶ Problematically for the French however, they were locked into such unsuitable and untimely initiatives by the very logic of their 'liberal', values-driven engagement. The result was deep resentment among the predominantly rural population of Algeria and a highly uneven degree of success across the country, as official reports acknowledged.⁵⁷

In a similar fashion, the SAS-led educational programme offered a glimpse as to how aspirational methods could return counterintuitive results. Viewed as an integral aspect of any modernising strategy, the opportunity to both address the supposed root causes of discontent and simultaneously create a window of opportunity to inculcate French secular values among the young meant that the enrolment of local children within SAS-sponsored schools was seen as a key metric by which to measure the effectiveness of the pacification effort.⁵⁸ But again the results were uneven, and indicative of the frictions that accompanied what were otherwise morally defensible actions. The first was a predictable attempt by the FLN to destroy French-built schools and stop parents from educating their children in such establishments. Yet continued attempts by the SAS to prioritise schooling led to a clever move by the FLN's political wing, the OPA. The Djebel Assa Mimoun region, for example, suddenly saw an 'astonishing' increase in the enrolment of students at schools in October 1956. Yet what appeared in the first instance to be cause for celebration turned out after closer analysis by the local SAS commander to be rather less favourable. The increase in school numbers was not the consequence of a sudden belief in the merits of French education on the part of the local populace but due to a concerted and intimidatory effort by local FLN cadres to overwhelm

the school's capacity to teach, thus undermining support for government's initiatives when large numbers of children were inevitably turned away. This was, as the French historian Gregor Mathias notes, an evolution in insurgent strategy that was conspicuously ignored in Galula's accounts of the same events.⁵⁹ The push for education also raised the fundamental problem faced in every pacification effort of this sort, namely what to teach. Clumsily, yet inevitably, the French chose to prioritise their own history over that of the Arab world. As Paret argues, when the names on the blackboard were those of Joan d'Arc, Napoleon and Foch rather than those of local heroes such as Abd el-Kadr and Abd el-Krim it was no surprise whatsoever when students chose to translate the ethos of militant French nationalism into militant Arab nationalism, and transfer their allegiances to the forces of their own national liberation.⁶⁰ The concept of 'education' may have promised advancements for French interests, but the process remained a means to an end, and it was unclear that the French were able to adequately control that dynamic. And lastly the reach of the education initiative was incredibly limited. In 1957 there were three schools under the supervision of SAS officers. By 1961 this had increased to twenty-two, but, realistically, that translated into less than 1,000 students out of a population of 9 million Algerians.⁶¹ Such numbers were never likely to contribute meaningfully to educating young Algerians in the wisdom and benefits of French belief, culture and traditions.

Even more revealing were the unforeseen political consequences of the SAS focus upon medical provision – a major plank of its population-centric pacification strategy – and land reform. At heart these programmes sought to burnish the credibility of the French administration in the eyes of ordinary Algerians – the former by keeping them healthy, and the latter by improving their economic circumstances. But again, such seemingly positive initiatives could deliver thoroughly counterproductive results in the long term. With regard to the mobile medical clinics that began to proliferate throughout rural Algeria, for example, it was certainly undeniable that the number of medical consultations exceeded several hundred thousand a year, and that medical provision was able to be extended deep into desolate and rural areas, the heartland of the armed insurgency. This was textbook hearts and minds. But, of course, the French did not have the monopoly on such methods. Indeed their emphasis upon healthcare provision simply spurred the FLN to develop its own parallel medical initiatives. By developing its own domestic medical services to care for the Algerian people, the FLN took its vital first steps toward acting and performing like a government, and thus providing the initial basis for a credible alternative to French rule.⁶²

The modernisation of agricultural production methods meanwhile may have been designed to create a greater and more effective degree of self-sufficiency and even surplus for the farming community, but it simultaneously interfered with traditional methods and systems of landownership, while the creation of new administrative districts confounded local political economies and relationships between neighbouring villages, now suddenly artificially divided from historical associations with one another. The impact upon ordinary Algerians was not a sense of relief at an improved harvest, but a sense of alarm at the splintering of their traditional social and economic milieu.

Logic

But even aside from these damaging technical, ideological and political shortcomings, there was also the fundamental problem underlying the entire pacification effort from beginning to end, namely that even accounting for its humanitarian component it could never disguise the confused and ultimately illegitimate nature of French intent. As the Office of Algerian Affairs spelled out, its central purpose, under which the SAS functioned as its representatives on the ground, was to 're-take control of the population'.⁶³ And that control, no matter the spiritual language used, ultimately sought to enable the colonial power to advance the changes required to serve its own political, economic and strategic interests, something that was detectable throughout the entire political effort. The emphasis upon a census-based strategy of ordering and classifying the local population was publicly justified as a way of allowing French administrators to gather the information needed to facilitate ambitious modernisation projects for the supposed benefit of ordinary Algerians but in reality it was a weapon in and of itself. Exclusion from the identity card system placed an individual in limbo, outside the system of government benefits. Families were denied allowances, military veterans their pensions. Thus the census became a weapon in the hands of the SAS whereby access to social rights and government facilities became almost entirely subject to the whims and discretion of its officers. The merest suspicion of support for the FLN could push an individual or family beyond the pale of government support and protection. As for the modernising projects themselves, each served the interests of French colonial rule in important ways. Education, for example, was viewed not simply in terms of the positive effects on the life prospects of young Algerians, but also as a vital mechanism to impart French secular values to an important stratum of Algerian society. The provision of health services was less about the health of the population per se than it was

about drawing a distinction between the capabilities of the French state and those of its militant opponents. Development projects that engaged male labour were additionally designed to draw in and subordinate those workers to the power of the state. Initiatives that engaged the female population served both as a key aspect of the modernising process and as a way of advertising the fundamentally humanitarian ethos of French pacification, but they were also deeply instrumental in intent by providing an opportunity to reflect the values of a French secular state in its attempts at religious emancipation, and simultaneously comprised a vehicle through which to confront the unpalatable cultural mores of a patriarchal Algerian society.⁶⁴ Meanwhile the emphasis upon the recruitment of natives into administrative and local government roles may have played to the heartfelt belief that pacification could only work if it established some sort of bridge between the forces of the state and the local population. But it was clear that the recruitment of such individuals also had a far more strategic purpose in mind: the creation of a political class that played to Algerian sensibilities, but which was firmly embedded within the hierarchical structures redolent of French political traditions. Each of these various initiatives was in its own way a step on the path to replacing native culture with one defined by French preferences. Yet, overwhelmingly, such preferences held little attraction for those to whom they were designed to appeal, a naked reality that robbed the strategy of its inherent moral and strategic value.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The French military's destruction of the armed insurgency by late 1960 was a paradigm of winning the battle while losing the war. Each tactical victory continued to bestow legitimacy upon the army's methods at the expense of the civilian political approach and blinded the military leadership to the reality of their totalising approach to war. By focusing upon and perfecting operational techniques aimed at the physical annihilation of their enemy, commanders allowed their preoccupation with destroying the insurgency to distance them from the priorities of a government gradually coming to recognise not only the ultimate costs in fiscal and human terms of victory in Algeria, but more importantly the lack of legitimacy or utility of such an objective. Vocal global support for national liberation struggles and the dim view taken by the United States of the efforts of colonial powers to maintain their imperial possessions gradually forced the de Gaulle administration to acknowledge that French control of Algeria was simply unpalatable from a political perspective. Thus a political class who perceived the ongoing conflict as an

obstacle to increasingly important relationships with Washington, the United Nations and the remainder of francophone Africa cared neither for the military's perceptions of tangible victory in Algeria nor its visceral attachment to the continuance of French rule there; particularly when the methods being used to achieve that objective betrayed the values that the French were supposedly trying to impart and contributed to widespread public disillusionment in metropolitan France. The upshot of this civil-military cleavage was as inglorious as it was inevitable. Recognising the political realities of the situation, de Gaulle shifted to an acceptance of Algerian independence, which was eventually granted in 1962. Furious at this betrayal at the moment of 'victory' the military high command in Algeria revolted, sparking a war between it and its own government.⁶⁶

The question of course is whether there could have been another way. Could there have been a properly political approach as originally envisaged by Soustelle, one based upon a culturally informed pacification effort spearheaded by teams of highly trained specialists sponsoring the building of schools, clinics and roads, providing financial assistance, advising on agricultural reform and local governance, and which could advertise the benefits of French colonial rule in a far more effective and far less painful manner than the military campaign that ultimately transpired? The answer lies entirely in the realms of the counterfactual of course but it is reasonable to argue that, if filtered through the ultimately illegitimate objective of maintaining continued French dominance, then such methods might have avoided some of the traumas of a brutal war but could never have delivered ultimate success as long as the mission was less a matter of understanding and 'developing' Algerians than turning them into docile collaborators. As it was the impact of the SAS 'enlightened' pacification strategy was highly uneven. At its best its successes were patchy, partial and deceptive, and contributed little more than a holding operation. At its worst, its failings were dispiriting, and created even greater problems.⁶⁷ Even discounting the corrosive effects of the military's influence upon the campaign, a strategy defined by cultural understanding, 'proximity' and population-centric methods could never disguise what was in reality a frantic and transparent attempt by France to maintain control. While the accelerated provision of schools, medical services and forms of economic regeneration may have been intended to draw ordinary Algerians onside, all it did was cause them to ask penetrating questions about the paucity of such initiatives in the preceding century and a half of French colonial administration, questions that the French could never answer. In the end, the SAS was part of a pacification strategy caught between two stools. In seeking to

integrate ordinary Algerians with metropolitan French ideals, the subsequently inevitable process of modernisation and democratisation could only lead to the election of Nationalist leaders and thus to secession, precisely that which a strategy of integration strived to avoid. But without that process integration could have no other purpose than deception, in which case it resolved nothing.

6 Pacification in Vietnam 1964–72

‘We thought we were the exceptions to history... [W]e thought history didn’t apply to us. Well, in Vietnam it proved we were not an exception to history.’¹

Whether the United States ever really ‘understood’ the Vietnam War is a question that resonates from the highest echelons of political decision-making down to the lowliest ‘grunt’. Received wisdoms tell us not.² In popular literature at least, the US campaign in Vietnam is presented as a sort of grisly caricature; an indiscriminate military effort trammelled by an obsession with technology, wedded to the strategy of attrition and fundamentally ignorant of Vietnam as a social and political entity. These failings thus set the ground for a vastly inflated yet curiously half-hearted conventional military and air campaign on the part of the United States that sought to use its traditional strengths of mass, manoeuvre and firepower in order to defeat the North’s politico-military struggle for national liberation.³ Defeat was inevitable.

Recently, however, a number of scholars have been able over time to provide a more sophisticated picture of events.⁴ One of the facets of the American effort which have received a far more balanced appreciation as a consequence is the pacification campaign. This was the aspect of the Vietnam War seen as key to addressing the armed political struggle that would define its fortunes. And a study of the pacification campaign does two things. Primarily it gives the lie to lazy caricatures. In the face of perhaps the most complex politico-military challenge since World War II it illustrated not only that the United States understood the political struggle in the countryside to be of paramount importance to the success of the Vietnam War but that it was a complex, multifaceted problem that demanded multifarious civil–military lines of operation. But it also provides us with a series of sobering observations regarding the ability of such methods, no matter their sophistication, to fashion the durable political outcomes sought by counterinsurgents.

Understanding Pacification

Pacification is a loose concept, one that provides little obvious clue as to methods or outcomes. Its association with the imperial era implies conquest, the quelling of rebellion, and/or the restoration of political or military order. What is interesting about Vietnam however is the way that the Americans would use the concept of pacification in a far more elevated sense, as a way of trying to relate the narrow operational focus of COIN to a series of big 'strategic' questions. Why are we fighting? What is our desired strategic outcome? How can this be achieved at a suitable cost?⁵ Pacification was a strategy rather than simply a method, one that attempted to provide logic to the American engagement in Vietnam. It spoke directly to the imperative of preserving and indeed extending the principle of liberal capitalism. It displayed a willingness to confront global communism not only by military means but by way of engaging the revolutionary potential of modernisation theory and nation-building, concepts that had gripped the policymaking elite and which, it was hoped, would lead to a world in line with American beliefs and preferences.⁶ Ultimately, however, pacification would be exposed. Not only by the wrongful assumptions and inherent limits of these guiding concepts but by a fundamental lack of understanding across the board as to what it should actually entail in real terms. Of course failure in Vietnam was down to many things: wrong-headed decision-making in relation to both intervention and escalation; the crude syllogisms inherent to containment theory; a multitude of bureaucratic, psychological and cognitive factors that imposed themselves upon the strategy-making process; a lack of clarity as to the relationship between military power and political objectives; a client regime over which the United States found itself unable to exert meaningful leverage; and of course the relentless and tremendously adept politico-military offensive being waged by the North.⁷ But pacification, as a fundamental aspect of the campaign, still deserves scrutiny because the factors above remain insufficient by themselves to explain why it was unable to deliver what its proponents had hoped. The object of this chapter therefore is to provide insights into the way that the United States sought to use its understanding of political warfare to help deliver its strategic outcomes. On the one hand it would illustrate a willing intent to engage in a range of military, political and socio-economic actions that would, theoretically at least, address the threat of communist revolutionary warfare. But it would also illustrate a fundamental inability to match such methods to America's ultimate strategic objective of a modern, democratic South Vietnam. Such shortcomings would not only help fatally constrain the ability of American

policymakers to dictate desired outcomes but also question some of the fundamental assumptions underpinning Western thinking on the matter of COIN and nation-building

There are essentially three scholarly perspectives of the pacification campaign. The first is brutal and succinct, arguing that it was a largely incoherent set of ideas; a formulaic assemblage of ‘best practices’ tacked onto a series of equally formulaic civic action initiatives that had been used *ad infinitum* in previous campaigns of colonial conquest. When placed in the specific context of Vietnam it never amounted to anything more than the application of brute force with the addition of certain population-centric refinements that sought to compensate for vast gaps in strategic thinking.⁸ The second line of argument is more sympathetic. It similarly identifies poor strategic choices by US policymakers, and the absence of GVN legitimacy across much of the rural south, as a fundamental cause of pacification’s failure, as well as acknowledging the intrinsic strength and capability of the communist enemy. But it also offers more detailed analyses of the conceptual, organisational and doctrinal factors – particularly at the tactical and operational levels – that impinged upon and shaped the ability of the United States and GVN to prosecute their chosen form of political warfare.⁹ The third and final line of argument tends to examine the intrinsic assumptions that underpinned pacification’s ultimate rationale, i.e. nation-building, and whether those assumptions matched the realities of America’s intervention in Vietnam’s civil war.¹⁰ It argues that their failure to do so exposed critical weaknesses in the American theory of political warfare.

Between them these various lines of argument draw out four aspects of the ‘understanding’ debate in relation to the Vietnam War. Firstly, the strategic aspect; the extent to which pacification was fully comprehended as a coherent and meaningful theory of action by those that advocated it. Secondly the operational aspect; whether the respective military and ‘political’ wings of the pacification campaign could ever balance their competing perspectives. Thirdly the tactical aspect; whether practitioners on the ground were equipped with the degree of cultural knowledge and perceptive judgement required to measure and thus shape rural political sentiment. And lastly and perhaps most importantly the theoretical aspect; whether a faulty understanding of the very nature of the war in Vietnam rendered the entire concept of pacification irrelevant.

Pacification: The Narrative

In its most basic terms, pacification referred to the ‘political’ war, undertaken in large part by the GVN but overseen in critical respects by

American advisors and which took place across many of the 11,000 hamlets of rural South Vietnam from the early sixties until the withdrawal of US ground troops in 1972.¹¹ In conjunction with a conventional military effort, purpose-built indigenous militias and counter-revolutionary forces would help create the conditions for local security to be established. Various economic initiatives would then be deployed in these newly secure areas in order to improve the material circumstances of the peasants. Political initiatives would capitalise upon this state of security and prosperity by re-forging the relationship between peasant and government. But this congruence of economic advancement, good governance and positive peasant sentiment wasn't simply designed to block the communist advance. In conjunction with ambitious developmental initiatives taking place among the institutions of central government, it would help lead to the realisation of the United States' ultimate strategic vision: a socio-economic revolution throughout the country and the emergence of a modern, advanced South Vietnamese state.

The first phase of the American-assisted pacification effort lasted from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s. It drew initially upon British methods from their recent campaign in Malaya as well as pre-existing GVN initiatives and nascent US COIN doctrine, and focused initially upon civic action, population control and the broader basic tenets of the good-governance approach to counterinsurgency.¹² But in its early iterations, such as the Strategic Hamlets Program (SHP), pacification was a failure. By corralling the peasant population into controlled spaces, it was hoped to provide security from communist infiltration and allow governance and developmental activities to be undertaken. Instead it provided readily identifiable targets for that infiltration as well as outstripping the ability of government forces to protect these new villages. It also fostered a sense of intense resentment among peasants subject to sudden physical dislocation and hardship.¹³ The collapse of the programme in 1963 due to these glaring failings signalled the advent of more imaginative socio-economic initiatives underpinned by an increasing degree of active US involvement in terms of oversight and assistance. But the pacification campaign continued to falter, largely because of the inability of American advisors to secure the necessary political reforms from their South Vietnamese clients.¹⁴ Weak local governance and corrupt officials hampered security efforts while the economic development of peasant areas continued to falter. Units of the South Vietnamese army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, ARVN) dedicated to pacification-related activities remained under-strength, demotivated and lacking in leadership. Attempts to control the movement of people and goods in order to keep both out of communist hands simply created resentment. South

Vietnam's own political leadership, seeking to coup-proof itself, constantly diverted critical military resources away from pacification duties in order to protect itself from perceived internal threats. All the while, communist influence continued to make ground.¹⁵

The pacification campaign remained ill-coordinated, lacklustre and ineffective throughout 1965–6 as the US military campaign under the newly appointed General William Westmoreland gained greater impetus. However, there was a concerted attempt from 1967 onward to refine and streamline its activities in line with the Johnsonian vision of the Vietnam War as being primarily 'developmental' in nature. Pacification now became the central plank of this initiative and led to the creation of the Civilian Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) initiative in May of that year. By coordinating the various government, intelligence and security actors involved in the pacification effort, bringing their activities into line with the military campaign being waged by the US army and US Marine Corps (USMC), CORDS adopted a far more rigorous approach to pacification.¹⁶ It prioritised the notion of 'revolutionary development' (RD); employing indigenous cadres in a mixture of developmental assistance, psychological operations and the destruction of potential enemy elements. Their job would be to help forge grass-roots political reform.¹⁷ In addition, CORDS assumed responsibility for direct attacks on NLF leadership and infrastructure: the Phoenix Program.¹⁸ Bolstered by this new kinetic approach and taking full advantage of the savage attrition meted out to the NLF during the Tet Offensive of January 1968, pacification made huge territorial gains during the remaining period of US engagement in Vietnam, drawing village after village under the control of the GVN. It was hoped that this would be enough to allow the gradual withdrawal of US military forces and the full 'Vietnamization' of the ground campaign. However, the North's military offensive of spring 1972, which capitalised upon the absence of US ground forces, saw the large-scale reversal of those territorial and political gains. The eventual fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975 was glaring proof of pacification's failure to engineer any durable resistance to the forces of communist revolution.

Crossed Wires

The particular strategic and ideological nature of pacification in Vietnam was illustrated by the choice of speaker to address the 1961 graduating class of the US army's Special Warfare Center COIN course.¹⁹ Walt Rostow, a former professor of economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), appeared an odd choice for such an occasion. Yet

as Thomas Richardson observes, he had been specifically chosen in order to make clear to his audience the connection between military power, the practice of counterinsurgency and the theory of 'modernization'. In simple and succinct terms modernisation theory described the existence of common patterns of sociopolitical development – industrialisation, secularisation, rationalisation and bureaucratisation – that would turn the traditional into the modern.²⁰ In reference to South Vietnam specifically, modernisation would ensure the wholesale change necessary to prevail against the North's brand of revolutionary warfare. In other words, the war was not simply about the defeat of communist insurgents. It was also part of an ambitious attempt to craft a social, economic and political revolution that would launch South Vietnam into the ranks of modern, liberal-democratic states. Pacification would therefore act as a central and enabling component of this endeavour, explicitly linking COIN with the objective of nation-building.²¹

But if Rostow and other theorists were largely sure of *their* ground in understanding the relationship between nation-building and COIN/pacification, the same could not be said of policymakers and practitioners.²² For some of the latter it implied huge infrastructure projects and rapid urbanisation. For others, change had to begin at the bottom, at the village level. Instead of rapid urbanisation there should be *gradual* change within rural communities which would mediate an otherwise ruinous, overheated encounter between tradition and modernity. The result, as Richardson states, was a messy compromise.²³ Under the Kennedy administration in 1962 America committed itself to involvement in the war in Vietnam not only on the basis of a scant understanding of that country but in the service of a nation-building effort that would be the responsibility of several groups of actors, each of which possessed differing ideas of what it meant. There were the technocrats, primarily concerned with the improving the efficacy of the central institutions of the Saigon regime and who perceived the problem primarily through the lens of improving the South Vietnamese government's attempts at public administration and the creation of an effective civil service. Then there was the CIA, who in contrast envisaged nation-building by way of a political counter-revolution at the village and hamlet level inspired by action on the part of dedicated revolutionary cadres (RC) working to direct the political loyalties of the rural population; a form of action drawn directly from the communist revolutionary playbook.²⁴ The final group acting as part of the pacification effort at this stage were the ground-level representatives of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) who worked in the villages attending to the various economic and material deficiencies suffered by

the peasant population, working on measures such as improved farming techniques and introducing more bountiful and resistant crop strains. These were the economic development advocates. Although theoretically part of an integrally cross-governmental exercise, the reality was that many of these individuals perceived themselves as operating independently of American or GVN designs, serving neither.²⁵

It therefore fell to Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, to provide a universally understood narrative as to precisely what nation-building actually meant and how the pacification campaign could contribute; an understanding that was urgently required by 1966 in light of an increasingly vast military campaign that appeared to be doing little to blunt the communist advance.²⁶ But as Eric Bergerud observes, the proceedings of the three US–GVN conferences held in 1966–7 (Honolulu, Manila and Guam) which confirmed pacification as constituting the central plank of the Johnson administration's anti-communist campaign in Vietnam, indicated that America's political leadership still possessed little common understanding as to what it actually meant in real terms. The only consensus appeared to be that pacification should largely be the responsibility of the GVN, with an American guiding hand on the tiller in the form of expertise and advice.²⁷ While Johnson was an ambitious 'high'-modernist, i.e. in favour of dramatic, large-scale development projects, his ambassador in Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr, still appeared to perceive pacification as a collection of tactical endeavours that resembled the basic techniques of counterinsurgency, i.e. conduct a census, issue ID cards, monitor the movement of people and goods, organise local defence militias and weed out revolutionary elements.²⁸ Matters didn't improve with the advent of CORDS in May 1967, which was designed to lend some coherence to proceedings. Despite being specifically designed to coordinate all pacification-related activities outside of the purely military sphere, both its progenitor Robert Komer and his deputy and successor William Colby instinctively rejected any tendency toward modernisation, preferring to focus upon far more limited tactical activities. Komer simply instructed CORDS to press on with a series of pre-existing initiatives such as *Chieu Hoi* (aimed at encouraging defections from the NLF), expansion and improvement of ARVN support for pacification, some kind of limited land reform, revamping the police, and the expansion of the RD cadre. But in doing so he was simply intensifying efforts that had so far proved ineffective. *Chieu Hoi* may have been successful in a statistical sense, with over 200,000 NLF encouraged to defect by 1972, but the GVN appeared deeply unwilling to countenance the reintegration of former communist cadres. It far preferred their 'neutralization'.²⁹ Meanwhile the ARVN, despite the logic of its

pacification mission, would never be equipped with the range of skills to do political warfare. Land reform, something that appeared to be a logical way of improving relations with the peasantry, helped little. As one American official would put it, 'Land reform is nice icing, but it will not help if the cake is rotten.'³⁰ RD in particular never fulfilled its promise. The programme had been so quickly expanded that the training programme lasted only ten weeks. Recruitment from local areas was impossible; because of the draft exemption the majority of recruits were 'connected', mainly coming from urban areas and volunteering from ulterior motives. It could never achieve the objective of grass-roots political reform unless proper authority was delegated to the village and hamlet level so as to allow proper transformation to occur. This delegation of power was highly unlikely, and never happened as the GVN continued to support only those activities that benefited the regime.³¹

Colby's subsequent tenure as head of CORDS from 1968 to 1972 rid the American-led effort of any remaining pretence at contributing toward the Johnsonian vision of a modern, democratic Vietnam. Under his stewardship it became the vehicle for a set of initiatives in thrall not to American policymakers and academics but to the communist architects of the North's politico-military campaign. Colby argued that the appropriate methods of blocking the advance of communism could be found in the pages of the latter's own revolutionary war doctrine, and that reintroducing the notion of low-level *political* reform was preferable to ill-thought-out socio-economic initiatives.³² Not only would the adoption by CORDS of the so-called Village System be a refutation of the developmental, liberalising premise espoused at the outset of the campaign but it would show just how far Rostow's abstract political ideology had been eroded in contact with the reality of war in Vietnam. And it would be under Colby that the Phoenix Program – the large-scale physical targeting of NLF leadership and infrastructure by American and GVN police, special forces and intelligence units – would not only become an integral and deeply controversial aspect of the pacification strategy, but one that was set to undermine American claims as to the moral good of that strategy.

But this consistent failure to achieve consensus over the basic definitions and principles of nation-building – vital if pacification was to make any sense – wasn't simply a self-inflicted wound. From the beginning the American vision of a modern, advanced and democratic South Vietnam competed with the very different philosophy of its original client, President Diem of South Vietnam. A Catholic and devout nationalist, Diem sought to fashion a specifically Vietnamese philosophy of nation-building that rejected both capitalism and communism as unable to fully

satisfy the spiritual and emotional needs of his people.³³ What this actually entailed in practice was something he was unable to articulate in any meaningful sense, but it dictated that his regime perceived US attempts to turn Vietnam into a technocratic, liberal-democratic state as an existential threat little different to that posed by communism;³⁴ a basic sentiment moreover that was thoroughly adhered to by successor regimes who were aware in a very real sense that American designs challenged the power hierarchies that kept a class of self-selected officials in power. Any attempt to adjust the basic structures of South Vietnamese society as they stood, particularly from the ground up, posed a significant threat to regime survival, particularly when it came to any reform of village politics that might disenfranchise those through whom the government maintained control in the rural areas, such as the powerful landlord class.³⁵ From its very earliest stages and throughout, the GVN sought to subvert American intentions, seeking to ensure that whatever ‘restructuring’ of rural hierarchies or central government institutions took place the ultimate beneficiary would be the GVN and its traditional power brokers and political office holders. Its subordinate client status notwithstanding, the GVN would seek to ensure that, wherever they clashed, its interests and preferences would prevail over those of the US government.

What becomes clear is that from the beginning of the American commitment to Vietnam, from the presidency downward through its principal diplomatic representatives, GVN officials, senior American practitioners and junior activists, there were thoroughly differing conceptions of what precisely pacification meant in the context of the ultimate political vision for Vietnam. While the White House and associated think tanks sought to realise a vision of providing Vietnam with all the trappings of a proto-Western democratic state, those *in situ* preferred to locate their manipulations at the most tactical levels in search of an entirely different vision, while their Vietnamese clients in Saigon quietly worked to ensure that neither would succeed and that the status quo would endure. As Porch states, even as countless officials toiled at making it work, pacification was simultaneously being robbed of all meaning.³⁶

‘Political’ vs ‘Military’ Warfare in Vietnam

One of the most striking aspects of pacification, particularly during that period 1964–8, was the way in which the US military appeared to understand its role in the process. Or not, as some would argue. The military of course were a fundamental part of the entire enterprise. In their hands lay the responsibility for creating the necessary security to

allow the advisors to better go about their mission of supervising the 'village war'. But this theoretically symbiotic relationship only emphasised the inherent tensions between respective civilian and military lines of operation. In particular it exposed the US army's tendency to allow its actions to be governed less by the specific demands of the conflict per se than by organisational and cultural preferences, as well as a specific understanding of the sequential relationship between military security and political development

This is crucial in understanding the context within which pacification would be required to function for crucial periods of the war. Even the period 1968–72 during Abrams's 'one war',³⁷ where pacification and military operations were theoretically indivisible, violence played a fundamental part in the US military approach; a real problem for advisors who perceived themselves as overseeing an extremely delicate game of political cat and mouse with an adept enemy, one which demanded an extremely judicious use of hard power in concert with the civilian tools of counter-revolutionary politics and economic development. Richard Holbrooke, later a noted senior American diplomat, began his foreign service career as an advisor in Vietnam in 1963. He was scathing of those military officers that he encountered, deriding them for their lack of understanding and perception and their simplistic belief that the conflict demanded a purely military solution;

The Army, about which I am learning enough to dislike, makes of men complainers who respect only rank, and consider their own rank a mark of their intelligence ... They resent and actually fear the possibility that a goddam civilian might be doing things that influence the war effort. Such things are not true of the best of them ... but our effort is too full of people who would kill at sight in the Delta, "since they're all VC [Viet Cong] anyway".³⁸

Such sentiments might legitimately be dismissed as a product of personal animus or generalisation rather than any cogent analysis of the situation. But Holbrooke's comments touch a nerve. Major General Julian Ewell, who commanded the 9th US Division in 1968–9, would state openly that 'I had two rules. One is that you would try get a very close meshing of pacification and military operations. The other rule is that military operations would be given first priority in every case.'³⁹ Under his command, the division used systems analysis to identify those techniques that resulted in the highest kill ratios, and then refined them to improve those ratios further. As Anthony King phrases it, 9th Division treated their role within the wider pacification effort as an engineering problem not a political one, with the foremost intent being to inflict maximum damage upon the enemy.⁴⁰ For the civilian population, the consequences of

Ewell's persistent attempts to liquidate the enemy were severe. During Operation SPEEDY EXPRESS between December 1968 and April 1969, over 7,000 civilians were officially recorded as killed by 9th Division, with countless thousands of others having undoubtedly suffered the same fate.⁴¹ And 9th Division was not unique in its use of indiscriminate firepower. Other pacification operations conducted between 1968 and 1972, even under Abrams's supposed 'one war' philosophy, featured a heavy reliance upon artillery fire and airstrikes on populated areas (in order to eliminate guerrilla forces).⁴² Numerous monthly pacification reports generated by CORDS confirmed that combat operations in support of pacification not only targeted villages and hamlets, inflicting civilian casualties, but also generated thousands of refugees – a massively complicating factor for pacification advisors trying to rebuild village political systems.⁴³ But even supposedly 'politically' aware military operators indicated a worryingly limited understanding of how pacification related to the wider campaign. 1969's Operation WASHINGTON GREEN saw the 173rd Airborne Brigade undertake operations in Binh Dinh province with the specific intention of occupying the hamlets in order to 'secure the people and their homes and destroy support for the VC'. Yet the brigade commander explained his actions as emblematic of 'an entirely new programme ... pacification'.⁴⁴ Thus, even as late as 1969 the brigade commander of one of the US army's premier formations in Vietnam appeared to believe that pacification was an *entirely new* initiative, as opposed to having been the central plank of American strategy for over three years by that point.⁴⁵ It mattered little. Subsequent large-scale operations simply saw American formations reverting to the habit of targeting civilian areas, either creating new refugee flows or forcibly relocating villagers to areas under government control.

Such actions feed the narrative that MACV's commanders and the US military establishment as a whole were largely ignorant of the subtleties required to defeat an armed social revolutionary movement by means other than firepower.⁴⁶ But just as the Vietnam War was a war of infinite complexity, so were the realities of the US military response to the demands of pacification. And its actions therein also require distinguishing between what it was that the military was *unable* to do, what it *chose* not to do, and why. How could intelligent commanders perceive heavy-handed actions as suitable in the context of a war fought primarily over the political sentiment of the rural population? Of course, the military effort in Vietnam wasn't entirely characterised by such methods. Indeed, the USMC's efforts around Da Nang in 1965, when Marines had turned their attention toward the gradual penetration of local villages rather than

simply indulging in an indiscriminate shooting match against the NVA, had been a significant influence on the government's prioritisation of pacification the following year.⁴⁷ But there is no doubt that for the most part the US military's behaviour appeared to suggest a deep-rooted unwillingness to conceptualise the conflict in 'political' terms, at least when it came to operational matters.

Such a schism has numerous explanations. Partly it could be explained by the chaotic organisational and administrative system pre-CORDS that segregated those American and GVN military officers in charge of 'creating' security from the pacification activists in charge of subsequently utilising that security for political ends. Even by 1965, as Bruce Kinsey, former deputy district senior advisor in Long An Province, observed, there was no integration of civilian and military lines of operation:

MACV had Advisors in every Province and an Advisor team in most Districts as well. They advised strictly on military things ... [T]he problem was they didn't get any special training in any of the civilian activities ... The military guys didn't know anything about this ... [T]here was no integration.⁴⁸

There was also the problem of regime forces' involvement in large parts of the pacification effort. The ARVN had been trained and equipped by the United States during the 1950s as a conventional army that prioritised manoeuvre and the use of large tactical formations supported by healthy amounts of firepower to limit casualties. Yet its poor performance in battle for much of the war had encouraged American strategists to perceive its main utility to lie in less martially demanding pacification activities, a decision that conveniently reinforced the US army's role as the main military actor in the fight against the North. Nevertheless this 'relegation' to pacification still left an army trained for a large-scale conventional warfare assuming a hefty role in a complex and often non-military political war. These problems were further heightened by the lack of trust placed in the ARVN as a whole by the South Vietnamese regime.⁴⁹ Thus senior appointments within the Armed Forces of the Government of Vietnam (AFGVN) were dictated, by and large, by political loyalties rather than ability. Units were rapidly rotated in and out of areas to actively prevent them becoming familiar with village conditions and thus forming relations with the peasant class. Conflicting chains of command proliferated, and powerful civilian ministers were able to interfere in military operations by bypassing senior officers. The result was a poor-quality officer corps trained predominantly in conventional operations and commanding ill-trained and ill-disciplined troops employed in a task for which they were ill-suited. Regardless, their tasking with the bulk of the pacification effort enabled their US counterparts to focus upon purely military activities.⁵⁰

But while administrative confusion and persistent ARVN shortcomings were obviously unhelpful, they do not wholly explain the obvious differences in approach between the military and political aspects of the pacification campaign. In reality this stemmed from a fundamental uncertainty on the part of both policymakers and commanders as to the nature of the war, the nature of the threat posed, and how the military and political aspects of the allied campaign should function in contact with one another. As Gregory Daddis states, from the beginning and throughout, MACV and its political masters were unsure as to whether it was the conventional forces of the North Vietnamese army (NVA) or the insurgent forces of the NLF that presented the more pressing threat.⁵¹ The result was confusion and paralysis for those charged with understanding how the military and political aspects of their response should fit together and what emphasis should be accorded to each. At the point that the United States committed itself properly to the war in 1964–5, the natural and entirely unsurprising consequence of this uncertainty, and of the lack of progress made politically at that point, was the awarding of primacy to the military effort.⁵² That primacy would prevail even with the advent of CORDS when, for reasons of unity of command and cohesion, it was placed under the authority of MACV. Although operational control was retained by its civilian leads, pacification still functioned in a bureaucratically subordinate manner to the military campaign.⁵³ And yet there was a simple logic to all of this. Even though it was recognised that winning the armed struggle merely provided the *opportunity* to win the political struggle, without which no victory could be achieved, the logical implication of that was that the military dimension had to be addressed first.⁵⁴ Pacification was therefore a fundamentally sequential proposition in MACV's eyes, where security was delivered first and so allowed the subsequent stimulation of political, social and civic development.⁵⁵ Until organised enemy military units were destroyed or forced to flee, nation-building was impossible. And that logic only gained credence with the events of early 1968 and the North's premature Tet Offensive. It is beyond dispute that the savage beating meted out to its forces by American firepower over the following months was the single most important factor in CORDS making the rapid and impressive progress that it did over large amounts of what had previously been highly contested ground.

The problem of how to employ military power as part of a pacification strategy was compounded by a second shaping factor, in this case the US army's own perspective of how to address the threat of revolutionary warfare. The standard critique, namely that COIN theory was essentially *terra incognita* for the majority of its officer corps, has a basis in fact.

Military officers may have read about COIN at West Point, Leavenworth or Carlisle, but very few had any personal experience of actually doing it. Nevertheless, with the arrival of FM-31-16 (Counter guerrilla Operations) doctrine in 1963 the US army was furnished with a conceptual basis around which to frame its actions against the requirements of pacification. But appearances were deceptive. FM-31-16's formulaic and universal prescriptions were bereft of any real substance when placed against the hideously complex reality of the revolutionary war being waged by the North in Vietnam, and the demands of political warfare in general. Even more problematic was the terminology used throughout the manual, and which readily conflated COIN with the basic essentials of conventional military operations. As Birtle and Daddis illustrate, the doctrine that purportedly equipped American military commanders to tailor their actions in support of pacification used terms such as 'pursuit', 'neutralization' and 'destruction'. It advocated 'continuous pressure' and 'aggressive action'.⁵⁶ It even, as Birtle points out, used four of the five Wehrmacht principles of encirclement operations.⁵⁷ COIN doctrine was being worded in such a way as to fundamentally encourage and sustain the US army's organisational preference for conventional battle, thereby actively aiding the military's inherent tendency to elide the demands of political warfare and to pursue its own organisational preferences by framing the campaign as primarily conventional in nature. As Colby stated, 'If you put pacification under the military, it would be lost, as the military would go out and shoot everybody.'⁵⁸ In fact Colby's sarcastic snipe may even have underplayed the military's willingness to transpose the mentality of large-scale conventional operations onto the problem of Vietnam. Even Westmoreland, an avowed supporter of pacification, was nevertheless able to entertain the notion during the NLF's Tet Offensive that the detonation of a 'few small tactical nuclear weapons' in Vietnam might be a suitable method of bringing the war there to an end in America's favour.⁵⁹

This isn't to say, however, that the army was entirely unreceptive to or unfamiliar with the notion of population-centric COIN. Jacqueline Hazelton has illustrated the measures taken by US advisors to improve the ARVN's COIN expertise during the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the latter was in charge of its own pacification campaign.⁶⁰ Daddis meanwhile points to evidence of concerted study of COIN theory in staff colleges and armed forces journals during much of the war. In September 1964 the army had attempted it for real with the Hop Tac offensive, modelled explicitly upon the French oil-spot technique. This had created concentric zones ringing Saigon and used US and GVN forces moving from the 'inside of the doughnut out' to clear the area of

NLF forces and secure it as they went.⁶¹ It was a failure. Not only did its extremely modest returns illustrate to commanders the sheer difficulty of turning a concept like the oil spot into reality but it also reminded them of the convoluted and highly personal lines of communication that governed the ARVN's unpredictable behaviour, as well as the absolute limits of the United States' ability to exercise influence over its clients by virtue of mere persuasion.⁶² Hop Tac was quietly buried at the end of 1966 and the army terminated its brief experiment with such methods.

The evident delta between the theory and practice of population-centric COIN notwithstanding, the final and perhaps oft-understated consideration impacting the military perspective was the US army's own sense of self. If pacification was at heart a 'political' activity designed to address the root causes of insurgency, then proper engagement in such activity rendered one a political actor chasing political goals. But although the US army understood itself to be engaging in Vietnam as part of a political enterprise in a Clausewitzian sense, i.e. using military power to create the terms for political victory, it nevertheless considered itself institutionally and culturally to be a fundamentally *apolitical* actor that steered clear of involvement in politics – American or otherwise. Regardless of the veracity of this self-perception, which conveniently ignored the US army's rich history of political actions in the aftermath of the US Civil War and in the Philippines, the sensibilities and self-regard that had been crafted and heightened by the experiences of World War II and Korea provided an obstacle to encouraging it to see beyond kinetic warfare and to think in 'political' and even non-military terms.⁶³ In essence, MACV and the US army in particular – the USMC less so – were discomfited by the demand to think about the political aspects of COIN in a fashion that might lead to the requirement to actually play at politics; a prospect that potentially contradicted core military, organisational and personal values.⁶⁴

These various conceptual, doctrinal and organisational factors resulted in a fundamental inability to square what was recognised as most important (pacification) with that which was perceived as most necessary (military operations leading to the destruction of the enemy). Theory and politics may have demanded that pacification be the dominant activity, but, as reflected in Westmoreland's 1964 appreciation, military action would not only have to set the conditions for pacification to succeed but would then be required again in order to seal victory.⁶⁵ Absent any more persuasive argument, pacification would have to operate for the majority of the time in the shadow of the kinetic battle. But the mere act of inflicting violence upon an enemy embedded within the population that comprised the target of the pacification effort held obviously disastrous

implications for the latter. As Bergerud observed, no amount of political sophistication or cultural sensitivity could alter the fact that a lengthy and vicious military campaign was necessary, and by extension it was impossible to do this without causing great destruction and loss of life, particularly among the civilian population. That attrition might ultimately weaken the NLF to a tremendous degree, but it weakened South Vietnam and the US will to fight to a far greater degree.⁶⁶

On the Ground: Expertise

Criticism of the military's role in the pacification effort is nothing new, but what of those actually dedicated to the task of supervising the village war up close? This was the task in large part of the so-called advisor system, the mechanism through which the United States directed its part of the GVN-led pacification effort. These individuals, akin in some ways to the British Frontier political officer or SAS team leader, were projected deep into a bewilderingly complex milieu. At the village level they moved among the ordinary peasant, the communist revolutionary, government-trained counterrevolutionaries, armed loyalist militia groups, allied and enemy military units and personnel, and various classes of GVN officials detailed to pacification duties. At province level, they were forced to navigate complex relationships with GVN province chiefs and senior GVN loyalist officials, and of course more senior representatives of the US military effort. It was the advisors who would provide the guidance and direct the resources required to make the political side of the war function to best effect.⁶⁷ So what was their level of knowledge and expertise, and to what extent were they equipped to manipulate and measure local political sentiment in accordance with the demands of the pacification strategy?

The early US advisory/military effort in Vietnam from 1962 was accompanied in its early stages by an effort to develop a thorough understanding of rural Vietnamese society in an anthropological sense. The impetus was provided in large part by one individual, Dr Gerald Hickey, who over the course of nearly two decades became a significant contributor to the US/GVN war effort, particularly the pacification campaign. His initial work of note was a highly influential 1962 report outlining how the dislocations, disruptions, general ill-will and economic losses imposed by the SHP would outweigh any benefits of surveillance and disruption of village aid to the Vietcong. He stated that unless the programme was overhauled to better fit the cultural and economic needs of the people living within the hamlets, it would fail.⁶⁸ The report was influential in the programme's subsequent closure. As David H. Price

states, '[O]ver the course of a decade Hickey's work found him shifting from specific forms of counterinsurgency support to providing cultural information of strategic value and trying to inform a military-intelligence audience of the cultural intricacies of the world in which they were waging a war.'⁶⁹

But if lone anthropologists such as Hickey were trying desperately to inform the military of the cultural intricacies of the world in which they were waging a war, it was clear that there were significant lapses in such expertise among a new breed of advisors who would, in gradually increasing numbers, be entrusted with transforming pacification into an actual form of political action. In part the problem could be summed up in three words: John Paul Vann. Perhaps the best-known US advisor during the war, Vann's knowledge of village society, his forceful and energetic leadership style and his refusal to be intimidated or browbeaten by his military counterparts bestowed upon him an almost legendary status.⁷⁰ Each district advisor, said Vann, should become within thirty days of his arrival the world's leading expert in the functional and geographical areas of his assignment. At a minimum, he proposed, the advisor should know in detail his district's political, social, educational and demographic structure, the local economy, the strengths and effectiveness of all local political and military leaders, the training and equipment of local friendly forces, and the location of all secure, contested and enemy-held hamlets. This, he stated, was the absolute minimum demanded, and comprised what he believed was a fraction of the required knowledge.⁷¹ What was essentially being demanded therefore was, across the board, an instinctive level of cultural sensitivity, inhuman levels of stamina, a capacious appetite for knowledge, an intensive and heightened level of training, and exceptional interpersonal skills.

From the beginning of the US pacification effort, such qualities were mere fantasy. Even basic language skills were in short supply. According to Andrew Gawthorpe, in 1959 only 9 of the 1,040 Americans working for government agencies in the country could speak Vietnamese. Even by 1965, only *one* member of the advisory team in Hau Nghia province spoke Vietnamese to a suitable standard. At that point advisors were being despatched into the field with as little as one hour of language training, and even those who did possess language skills were often unable to understand peasant idiom. One observer believed that only a handful of American advisors in the *entire* country were truly fluent.⁷² Communications were therefore invariably directed through interpreters, with suboptimal results.⁷³ The lack of formal advisor training or monitoring meant that not only did superiors tend to prioritise a can-do attitude over deep local knowledge, but individuals were frequently sent

into the field without any mechanism for registering or monitoring their activities. Thus individuals were charged with entering a complex and unfamiliar society and tasked with improving the social, economic and political life of the rural population by making GVN local government more effective and responsive to popular needs, but expected to do so without basic language skills, with minimal knowledge of the village environment, and lacking any proper form of oversight and coordination.⁷⁴

Obvious shortcomings in the advisor system eventually encouraged an acknowledgement of the importance of training. This would come in the form of the Vietnam Training Center (VTC) established in April 1967, and the intensive two-month course that it provided for those destined for advisory duties. At first glance the syllabus was impressive, and not a little surprising. Daily periods of language instruction were interspersed with lectures on subjects such as Vietnamese history and culture, the structure of government in South Vietnam, the fundamentals of nation-building, Maoist doctrine and the principles of counter-revolutionary warfare, as well as the administration, purpose and methods of CORDS. These were supplemented by a steady flow of presentations on more esoteric topics such as 'The Cult of the Guardian spirit in the Vietnamese Village', 'The Peasant and his Hamlet', 'Marxism v Asian Philosophy' and 'Race, Culture and Nation'.⁷⁵ More concrete instruction was provided in booklet form by way of *The Vietnam Village: A Handbook for Advisors*. The foreword to the booklet explained the 'village' as a socio-political entity, the foundation of provincial and ultimately national identity. It explained that CORDS intended to revitalise the village community, with reforms to village structure designed to 'blend relevant tradition and necessary innovation to create a viable local governmental structure, one which is capable of leading the rural population in the defence of their interests and the solution of [*sic*] their problems'.⁷⁶ It provided the advisor with detailed instructions on matters such as the organisation and function of village government in the GVN structure, the structure of the newly imposed 'village council', systems of decision-making therein, and the leadership role of village authorities. This was supplemented by information on village economy and finance, with detailed instructions on procedures for budgeting and accounting duties, and a lengthy chapter on village security structures. The booklet concludes with a chapter on 'The American Advisor and the Village', explaining in detail the way in which the newly arrived advisor should relate to their new surroundings, pointing the reader toward the 'Village Files: The institutional memory of the Village'.⁷⁷ In conjunction with the *Village/Hamlet Status Handbook*, these files almost exactly replicated the

tribal directory system used by British political officers on the Frontier and French IA officers in Morocco in order to delineate the various tribal sections and clans under their jurisdiction, identify key personalities therein and attempt to track changing patterns of influence. They provided what was supposed to be a handy and easily accessible form of reference in order to visualise the local political economy at village level, albeit a political economy imposed top-down by government design.

VTC training was designed to churn out individuals imbued with the range of skills demanded by Vann. But on the whole it failed to do so. Lectures on revolutionary war theory led, as in any military staff college, to either superficial knowledge or overconfidence in the ability to comprehend such a complex phenomenon.⁷⁸ Language training was superficial. The majority of graduates could only manage small talk in native form, which meant not only a preference for dealing with English-speaking GVN officials, but a corrosive tendency to consider those unable to speak English as being intellectually inferior. It also meant being unable to converse directly with the ultimate prize, i.e. the village population.⁷⁹ Classroom generalisations as to the motivations of the Vietnamese peasant abounded, and reflected the materialistic emphasis engendered by development theory that CORDS had promised to renounce. Central instruction on the cultural and sociopolitical character of Vietnam, while admirable, was problematic. It either failed to recognise the often-stark differences between the various regions and provinces across which the newly minted advisors would be distributed, or alternatively encouraged scepticism and a belief that no specialist knowledge was required to perform advisory duties in Vietnam, the peasant being no different in their motivations and worldview than any other economically deprived individual. And despite the intense training, the defining sentiment for VTC graduates upon arriving in South Vietnam was at the very least a sense of discombobulation and at worst a sense of total bewilderment, with the students having gained very little sense of the reality of their prospective mission from the comfort of classroom instruction in the United States. These graduates would be the men required to exercise a standard of perceptive judgement in contact with a highly complex situation that was completely beyond most of them.⁸⁰

Such deficiencies really mattered, because they contributed to a worrying gap in their primary task, which was the ability to properly measure rural political sentiment and thus understand the ways in which pacification was or was not working. Not only that, the advisors found little in the way of substantive support from the US army's intelligence assets detailed to assist the pacification effort. This focused almost exclusively on locating enemy main force units rather than concerning itself with

population matters. As Krepinevich notes, South Vietnamese officers found their US military intelligence counterparts informing their own pacification effort by way of FM 30-5, a form of combat intelligence doctrine geared to fighting Soviet or equivalent peer-enemy forces in a European environment.⁸¹

Without the ability of those in the field to provide accurate information as to the progress of the political war at village level, the Americans grew to rely instead upon statistical metrics. These were designed to help advisors determine the levels of security achieved, and the social, political and economic development generated in those areas of rural South Vietnam where the GVN had a presence.⁸² But problems in this respect that had emerged in the earlier stages of the pacification campaign would become most acute as it matured under CORDS and its new Hamlet Evaluation Scheme (HES). The HES provided eighteen indicators, each graded A (best) to E (worst), by which to assess such progress. These might include measurement of VC military, political and subversive activities, friendly security capabilities, and the status of health, education, welfare and economic development projects.⁸³ It sounded comprehensive, but the result was MACV relying upon the entirely subjective judgement of more than 250 district advisors, with each collecting data on around forty hamlets per month. The upshot was a monthly average of some 90,000 pages of reports; far beyond any realistic analytical capabilities open to MACV and compounded by the fact that it was forced to then publish its results without testing or verifying its data.⁸⁴ And that data was highly flawed. There were consistent question marks over the ability of advisors to understand mundane but potentially vital details of their brief, i.e. tax collection data, agricultural and manufacturing productivity, cost-of-living measurement, population distribution and densities, enemy defections and desertions etc. Furthermore, the HES tended to replicate one of the major shortcomings of the SHP, which was the tendency to focus upon inputs rather than outcomes. So for instance the success of 'educational development' might be measured by inputs such as the number of schools built, the numbers of teachers employed or the number of pupils enrolled. Yet the success of pacification needed to be measured by outcomes such as improvements in social mobility, employability and aspirations, and desired political allegiances.

Compounding all of these technical shortcomings was the broader issue of self-deception. The ever-present threat of career suicide for any officer who dared downgrade the security of a given hamlet in the face of public pronouncements of success led to the inevitable inflationary claims of progress. As Huntington observed, the need to produce results developed among CORDS operators a philosophy and attitude that

differed from more detached observers. ‘The former’, he noted, ‘[a]re under pressure to produce, the latter only to report. CORDS has to believe that it is accomplishing results, and it needs to do what is necessary to accomplish results. The operators are thus usually far more optimistic than the observers.’⁸⁵

HES was not universally criticised of course, and some found it as accurate a measure of political sentiment as was possible in the circumstances.⁸⁶ But basic deficiencies were significant enough that in 1969 President Nixon’s Vietnam Special Studies Group (VSSG) would return the verdict that it did not fulfil the task of adequately or accurately measuring the degree of government control in the countryside.⁸⁷ This led to various improved iterations such as HES 70/71, which sought to introduce a measure of objectivity and refinement to the monthly reports. But the basic problem remained. So-called revolutionary development simply could not be measured in any available sense, at least not by a single reporting system serving something as complicated and multifaceted as CORDS.⁸⁸ As a consequence, despite their technical innovations, the American pacification effort operated essentially blind to the true state of political loyalties in rural South Vietnam. Ultimately it embodied the problem identified by the advisor James Willbanks who sagely observed, ‘If you can’t count what’s important, you make what you *can* count important.’⁸⁹

Theory: Assumptions and Effects

Pacification in Vietnam operated under the guidance of certain canonical assumptions relating to the practice of counter-revolutionary warfare. Foremost among these was the belief that some sort of representative government allied to economic reform would somehow lead inevitably to the spread of democracy; an assumption that continues to underpin much current thinking in Western COIN. The importance of the American defeat in Vietnam to this narrative lies in its supportive nature: failure there was put down to the inability of the United States and the GVN to satisfy the fundamental principles underpinning the ‘good governance’ approach.⁹⁰ The consistent failure to build support on the part of the rural population for the Saigon regime through political and economic reform, compounded by a lax attitude toward the discriminating use of force, held open the door for communist infiltration and eventual defeat. However, more recent scholarship proposes that the reason for the failure of pacification was, arguably, not its inability to achieve reform but rather its consistently wrong-headed pursuit of reform as the ultimate objective. As Clemis and others have argued,

Vietnam was not a war in which success rested upon economic development, or the recasting and strengthening of the relationship between population and government. What mattered most was not popular support, economic development or political legitimacy but one very simple thing: control over that population and their territory. Political and economic development was therefore subordinate and incidental to the more pressing and critical short-term objective of expanding physical control. Clemis is not alone in his rebuttal of the established narrative.⁹¹ At the height of the campaign in 1967 the distinguished political scientist Samuel Huntington undertook a lengthy visit to Vietnam in order to judge the progress of the pacification campaign. As he stated in his subsequent report:

Pacification appears to rest upon two assumptions. Firstly, lasting improvements in security can be achieved by the extension of a Governmental presence into the countryside. Second, the support of the peasants for their Government can be won through the improvement of their economic and social wellbeing. Both of these assumptions may well be true. But their truth is certainly not self-evident, and abundant evidence exists to suggest that they could be more false than true.⁹²

Huntington went on to reject the notion that the war in Vietnam should focus upon establishing government legitimacy or engage in externally directed attempts to fashion local and/or national identities. It would be won, he proposed, through maintaining control of the population rather than by engineering political support for the GVN. The latter was largely irrelevant, not to mention unfeasible. 'The most one can realistically speak of', he wrote, 'is the relative ability of the government and the [revolutionary movement] to exercise authority and to control the population'.⁹³ The importance of the arguments advanced by Clemis and Huntington is that they cut straight to the heart of whether the failure of pacification was due to its inherent frictions and inconsistencies in terms of implementation and detailed understanding, or whether it failed because its designs, energies and ultimate rationale were entirely misdirected. If the former, this implied techniques and processes that could be studied and improved upon. If the latter, then it suggested a wholesale misunderstanding of the dynamics of civil war – that form of conflict in which the insurgency was functioning. By framing the success of the insurgency as primarily the result of a failure of government legitimacy, of effective 'governance' and an absence of material prosperity, pacification took the logical path of seeking to provide what was missing. This was precisely the conceit underwriting the strategy in Vietnam from 1964 until the final refinement of CORDS in 1969. But as Jeffrey Race identified in his seminal work *War Comes to Long An*, '[W]hat mattered to

the peasant ... was largely limited to issues within his own community ... and the resolution of concrete local issues ... [N]ationalism as such was rarely a motivating theme.⁹⁴ Ultimately, the question for the peasant was not a distant consideration of the future form of the Vietnamese nation but the more immediate question of who could physically control and protect his or her environment in the short to medium term.⁹⁵ Pentagon systems analyst Thomas C. Thayer found that nearly 75 per cent of respondents to pacification analysis surveys expressed their primary aspiration to be peace and security.⁹⁶ This, not 'government' or anti-communist ideology, was the legitimacy that really mattered. Yet such a form of control was the absolute antithesis of pacification in the context of the Vietnam War. From an ideological point of view, its entire rationale had been to catalyse the kind of favourable and self-sustaining political conditions that not only served American preferences but at the same time entirely obviated the need for physical control. Because without the ability to create self-sustaining reforms based upon popular support, as opposed to military control, the entire nation-building effort in South Vietnam would be for nought. And even if one were able to ignore the glaring ideological implications of a control strategy, on a practical level the human and material resources needed to actively implement such a strategy throughout South Vietnam, not to mention the permanence required to exhaust and outlast the patience and reach of a revolutionary enemy, was utterly beyond the corrupt and ineffective GVN. As such it would have required the supplemental presence of hundreds of thousands of American conscripts committed to garrison duties throughout thousands of villages and hamlets. Not only was this an intolerable prospect for successive US administrations seeking a way out of Vietnam, but it flatly contradicted the fundamental point that it be a process 'owned' by the client regime in order to allow it to build a durable, long-term political relationship with its own population.

There was one other major problem. As some observers noted, pacification had indeed led to a measurable extension of the proportion of the population that could be considered 'secure'. But it did so not by drawing the rural population under the wing of government control but by forcing swathes of that population to move to the cities instead – usually as refugees. Between 1962 and 1969 the populations of South Vietnam's major cities doubled or even tripled.⁹⁷ While that theoretically made the job of the NLF more difficult, insofar as it lacked the same degree of influence in cities as in the countryside, this sudden explosion in South Vietnam's urban population threatened an entirely unpredictable degree of political upheaval over time, as dispossessed elements within these now vast cities began to compete for advantage. The only

way to counter this, argued Huntington, was for the GVN to establish a firm grip in the countryside in order to prevent such destabilising population movements. And logic dictated that if the current strategy for doing so was failing, then an alternative had to be found, in this case a strategy of 'accommodation'. In short, the GVN would have to reverse its policy of suppressing the powerful religious minorities and sects in the rural areas that it perceived as a threat.⁹⁸ Instead it would have to co-opt them and use their strong local political structures as a way of implanting its own authority. It would also have to accommodate the revolutionary NLF within its administration. For both the GVN and the United States, the implications of Huntington's report were profound and largely intolerable. The former would have to incorporate into its rural governance systems those elements that it perceived as posing the greatest threat to its authority. For the United States it would mean admitting that pacification, the central plank of its Vietnam strategy, had somehow created a situation whereby potentially the only way forward was de-escalation and an abandonment of the ideological principles that had led the Americans into Vietnam in the first place.⁹⁹ As one official who read the report was heard to remark: 'If this study is right, then everything we're doing is wrong'.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

The Vietnam War was, for the Americans, bereft of understanding at all levels. Strategically, there was a fatal inability to articulate precisely how military power and economic might could stabilise and advance the prospects of the South Vietnamese government in its struggle against the communist North. As George Packer pithily phrases it, there existed in Washington DC a curious belief that the politics of South Vietnam could somehow be controlled by a small group of Americans with backgrounds in politics, law, academia and car manufacturing sitting in a room eleven time zones away.¹⁰¹ Ideology and hubris played its part of course, but so did the rampant tolerance of policymakers and senior military leaders for an unspoken policy of self-deception. So too did the willingness to see the question of how military power could best be utilised to halt the spread of communism in South Vietnam substituted with a much easier question, namely, how to fight the war in a manner that played to American strengths? The delta between that answer, i.e. a strong preference for conventional military operations, and the actual degree of political progress made would simply be filled with numbers: enemies killed, revolutionaries turned, local forces trained and raised, hamlets secured, peasants fed and educated, village leaders elected, tons

of rice planted. Utterly divorced from the reality of political warfare, this was a system of thinking that inevitably promoted outright lies and misinformation but which suited the powerful bureaucracies involved, unable as they were to accommodate those forms of information that might challenge their vested interests.

Pacification may therefore have represented that sphere of the war effort where the true nature of the conflict appeared comparatively well understood and stood in stark contrast to the crude approach taken by the military and its political overlords. Yet in its own way it was even more intellectually fragile. The notion that a society built upon millennia of tradition could be rapidly and remotely transformed according to ambitious American preferences appears other-worldly, but such concerns appeared to matter little to those in charge. At the Honolulu conference of 1966, when President Johnson settled upon pacification as the central tenet of American strategy in Vietnam, he informed those fellow conferees responsible for actually implementing it that they would quickly be held to account by way of the following demands; 'How have you built democracy in the rural areas? How much of it have you built, where and when? Give us dates, times and numbers.'¹⁰² Yet all the time, pacification would labour to overcome the reality that progress was not only coercive but entailed an essentially negative process: the forces of communist revolution could be weakened, but the GVN could never be strengthened.¹⁰³ And as Michael Shafer pointed out, the prospect that a small minority of foreign-trained officers could have a major impact on this unfortunate dynamic was entirely limited by the very nature of the client; the weaker the political system, the more likely the client is to worry about the threat from within than the threat from without.¹⁰⁴ Such negativity not only rendered the 'positive' aspects of the pacification strategy moot, but dictated that its darker, more muscular dimensions, i.e. military firepower or the CIA-backed Phoenix Program in which vast numbers of NLF leadership figures were killed or imprisoned, could never compensate for what was missing.¹⁰⁵ Although, under Colby's leadership from 1969 to 1972, CORDS represented the most coherent approach to pacification seen in Vietnam, it still rested upon the fundamental assumption that short-term pacification activities at the village level would be enough to allow security forces to withdraw and move on, leaving behind them newly constituted militias and strengthened village governments that could withstand subsequent penetration by communist cadres. But as Huntington, Shafer, Clemis and Jackson observe, such practices only ever result in a temporary improvement in the local population's loyalty toward the government. Whatever positive effect was achieved could not withstand the withdrawal of

physical control, a point proved by the fact that the gains made by pacification so rapidly post-Tet were so easily reversed by the North's 1972 offensive.¹⁰⁶ And the advisor system shared the blame. Not only did its officers tend to accord with the faulty precepts of pacification theory in terms of its long-term political effects but, as Andrew Gawthorpe points out, despite their best intentions they did not, by and large, understand the fine detail of rural Vietnamese society, its indigenous political structures, and the intricacies of the complex relationship between hamlet, province and government. That lack of insight encouraged the tendency at all levels to adopt an unhelpful and corruptible reliance upon statistical metrics for success. This was utterly beyond the systems designed for the task. Although able to provide evidence of pacification's 'spread', it was far less able to judge that which truly mattered, i.e. the durability of those gains.

Most important, however, was the illogical dynamic at play. Pacification, at heart, sought to give life to the advice given by US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to South Vietnam's President Nguyễn Cao Kỳ in 1967, that '[i]f you give the people everything they want – television sets, automobiles, and so on – none of them will go over to communism'.¹⁰⁷ But in seeking to serve the aspirations demanded by the modernisers and nation-builders, it could not then be framed in the stark and limited language of control, despite the fact that the latter may well have been the only appropriate way to properly defeat the communist threat. Neither could it accord with Huntington's recommendation that the GVN accommodate the strongest political actors in its rural areas, namely South Vietnam's religious and ethnic minorities, and the NLF. Not only did the GVN reject such a strategy as being entirely counter to its interests, but any attempt to bolster such elements ran entirely counter to the ideological justification for American intervention, i.e. modernisation leading to democratisation. Thus pacification would be forced to continue slowly and inevitably diluting itself to an ersatz form of limited social engineering at the village level that would prove a flimsy barrier to the subsequent communist military onslaught. Core assumptions as to the ability of sociopolitical reform to defeat an implacable foe had been proved wanting. Rostow's eventual acknowledgement that, 'as for the linkage between economic development and the emergence of stable political democracies, we may, in retrospect, have been a bit too hopeful' was, to all intents and purposes, an admission of the fundamental wrongness of the beliefs that had guided the entire effort.¹⁰⁸ In the end, and crumbling under its own contradictions, pacification had become 'just another word for war'.¹⁰⁹

7 Political Warfare in Iraq: Al Anbar and Basra, 2006–9

‘We frequently deluded ourselves into attributing positive developments in Iraq to our own efforts, when instead it was deal brokering between Iraq’s political parties and militias that was largely responsible for everything that happened outside of Baghdad.’¹

In 2007 General David Petraeus, commander of coalition forces in Iraq, addressed the US Congress on the matter of the highly successful battle then being waged against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Pointing to events the previous year in Anbar Province and the so-called Awakening there which had signalled the beginning of AQI’s demise, he noted the transformative effects achieved when US forces and local tribes had united in order to destroy their common enemy. While Anbar was unique, he stated, ‘it nevertheless demonstrated the dramatic change in security possible with the support and participation of local citizens’.² Indeed such was the drastic change in American fortunes over a short period of time that the Anbar Awakening drew huge attention from policymakers and academic and military commentators keen to understand how the methods used might aid a revolution in COIN. The example of Anbar and the subsequent spread of the Awakening movement elsewhere in Iraq appeared to all and sundry to be a twenty-first-century counterinsurgency paradigm. It featured a new and sophisticated doctrine (FM 3-24), a renewed emphasis upon the importance of cultural intelligence, and a highly adaptive response by commanders to local political conditions that had allowed the transformation of a previously moribund politico-military effort into a war-winning design. Such was the apparent success of the model that the campaign in Anbar 2006–8 was hailed by many as the pre-eminent example of US counterinsurgency success in the post-war era.³ It had not only delivered almost total victory against AQI, it had in the process rescued Iraq from incipient sectarian implosion. More than that, it emphasised the value of doctrine, it validated the surge and it rehabilitated the reputation of the US military and its senior leadership.⁴ It was a ‘win’ in any number of ways. But just as importantly

for the COIN proponents, its success stood in stark contrast to events in the south and the parallel experience of the British in Basra during the same period. Here, unable and unwilling to do COIN in any significant sense and increasingly fearful of overt involvement in the politics of southern Iraq, the British army's attempts at a light-touch military effort would simply result in the breakdown of all attempts to exert proper control over their operating environment, a withdrawal from Basra at the hands of their militia opponents, significant damage to Britain's military reputation in the eyes of the United States, and a misguided reinvestment of military capital into the quagmire that would be Helmand.

But while the contrast between the American and British experience appears obvious, there are important qualifications. In certain respects, of course, the American effort *was* strikingly successful, but the Awakening's subsequent transformation into a broader Sunni political movement would simply cause American problems to metastasise. It would cause immense frictions between Iraq's Sunni community and its Shia-led government, while its impact upon the delicate balance of Anbar's tribal hierarchy would have subtle but important implications for tribal unity there. Both of these developments would aid in the explosive re-emergence of another insurgency in Anbar in 2014, this time in the form of Islamic State (IS), an entity so threatening to the entire region's stability that it would force the return to Iraq of US forces and the (re)commencement of a further five years of military operations.

It is this, the evolution of the Anbar Awakening from a signal victory to something far more questionable, that reveals surprising commonalities between the respective American and British experiences. In Anbar and Basra, both sets of coalition forces engaged in a form of political warfare. Yet events during this period suggest that they also either lacked a genuine understanding of how their actions related to local political and social dynamics and what the implications for that might be for politics at a national level, or that they understood but cared little. The same events also suggested that they were far less in control of determining outcomes than they preferred to imagine. These points, largely hidden at the time, matter greatly. While the Americans quickly drew upon the Awakening to promote the wider utility of 'tribal engagement' and then attempted to transplant this seemingly war-winning strategy to Afghanistan, and while the British engaged in deep soul-searching as to the paucity of effective 'strategy' in southern Iraq, the longer-term lessons were in reality far more sobering.⁵ For both the Americans and the British their experiences in retrospect highlighted how results in both arenas were ultimately determined less by their own actions and choices than by the complex, powerful and often unmalleable forces intrinsic to local society.

Fragmentation

In his work on the early stages of the coalition intervention in Iraq, Glen Rangwala posed a question that applied to British and Americans alike. He pointed out that western COIN doctrine focuses as a primary concern upon the matter of host-government legitimacy. All actions taken are supposed to accord with the objective of reinforcing that legitimacy. But, he argues, the basic conception of what exactly the ‘government’ is, where it is to be found and the conceptual lines between it, the insurgency and the surrounding society is rarely addressed.⁶ In the context of a shattered Iraq in 2003–5 this problem was a fundamental one. Government no longer existed. As the centralised authority of the Saddam regime fragmented in early to mid-2003 there emerged in its place a vicious, swirling, directionless mass of competing ethnic groupings, tribes, sects, militias, warlords, terrorists and foreign fighters. Western military power had succeeded in toppling Saddam’s regime but it had also succeeded in transforming the known into the unknown and, in certain instances, the unknowable. Hierarchies had been inverted and into the void had emerged highly unpredictable elements, each with their own peculiar local and regional alliances, economic interests and political aspirations. Government was now a matter of interpretation, not fact. Against this entirely unpromising backdrop, American and British military actors would have to help their civilian CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority) partners to somehow craft a functioning form of political stability.

For Anbar, the large central-western province that contained the major cities of Fallujah and Ramadi as well as the western outskirts of Baghdad, the fragmentation that had followed the fall of the regime in combination with broader political developments at the national level dictated that by mid-summer of 2004 there was no functioning government.⁷ In its absence, significant swathes of the population had been drawn into a violent contest; both against the American occupation and in defence of their own relative positions of power. US forces sat entirely isolated from the Sunni population they had initially sought to liberate from tyranny. The process of fragmentation had not only aided the formation of the insurgency but had additionally empowered political challengers such as the Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, allowing Sunni and Shia elements to combine in their assaults against US and coalition forces in Anbar. In addition, limited coalition resources facilitated an additional influx of jihadist elements from across the porous border with Syria. By 2004 major cities such as Ramadi and Fallujah had fallen under the sway of these anti-coalition elements.

Commentators have observed, however, that even amidst the maelstrom of violence beginning to engulf this strategically important province there appeared an obvious set of actors around which coalition forces could build credible forms of governance and security. These were the two dozen or so Anbar tribes, most of which sat within the historically powerful Dulaymi federation and which had constituted Anbar's socio-political centre of gravity before and during Ba'athist rule.⁸ With the vast majority of Anbar's Sunni population identifying with one of these tribes or segments therein, it appeared logical for occupying US forces to quickly forge some sort of relationship with what were theoretically the dominant political groupings in Anbar in the absence of any functioning central government. The problem for US troops was their lack of requisite knowledge and a wider lack of operational and strategic flexibility.

Across much of Iraq at this point, many US formations trained primarily in conventional manoeuvre warfare were resorting to highly kinetic, firepower-intensive methods in response to the growing insurgency, a form of behaviour that attracted significant criticisms from Iraqis and allies alike.⁹ There were outliers in this respect, of course. In 2005 in Tal Afar, 3rd Armoured Cavalry Regiment under Colonel H.R. McMaster pursued recognisably population-centric techniques with some success, using kinetic operations to kill or displace insurgents and then following up with civic action initiatives in order to build security.¹⁰ But as early as March 2004 the US Marine Corps's 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1 MEF) had entered Anbar intent on fighting a 'political' war, one focused primarily upon the delivery of governance and security as a suitable antidote to anti-coalition violence. And it was quite clear that the population was their primary concern. Subscribing to a form of COIN theory that predated FM 3-24, and drawing instead upon the interwar-period Small Wars Manual and Vietnam-era 'CAP' doctrine, the Marines entered Anbar in 2004 very much in a COIN mindset, with three lines of action to the fore: security and stability, information operations and civil affairs.¹¹ Terms such as 'information superiority', 'key leader engagement' and 'rapport and credibility' preceded any mention of the physical defeat of anti-coalition forces.¹² And for the Marines, the strength of tribal authority evident in Anbar theoretically offered them the degree of purchase upon the local population required for these measures to take hold. Between the USMC's elevated COIN approach and the fundamentally tribal structure of Anbari society, there appeared the opportunity to pursue a mutually beneficial form of cooperation that could provide some semblance of governance and security.

Subsequent to the events of the Awakening, such a strategy appeared obvious. In March 2008, for example, USMC General Paul Allen had

reflected that, ‘without tribal engagement, almost nothing else was possible in Anbar... It gave us the opportunity to build credible government at a provincial and local level.’¹³ But Allen’s recognition of the benefits of that approach well after the event was of no help to the USMC units arriving in the province in early 2004 and finding themselves confronted with the task of understanding how an entirely unfamiliar society functioned in real terms. While commanders readily grasped the potential value of tribal engagement, actually designing and applying such methods in practice was hampered by an almost total lack of situational awareness. Despite their best efforts, month-long instructional courses in Arabic and Arab culture and lectures on the use of CAP platoons in Vietnam were little preparation for ‘graduate’-level political warfare on the ground in Iraq. As the senior intelligence officer within 1 MEF subsequently admitted, the formation’s academic knowledge of tribal structures in Anbar Province was comprehensive but of little practical use;

We didn’t know who was and what was what. We knew that culture was more than what hand you shake ... it’s who are the decisionmakers here, who allocates resources, how are decisions made ... There’s no book that tells you these are the different powerbrokers, here’s how you approach this one, here’s how you approach that one ... it’s being able to understand how that all fits together ... we didn’t develop that.¹⁴

Fellow 1 MEF intelligence officers admitted similar shortcomings in the intelligence picture. ‘We had a very immature understanding of the authority and power of the tribes ... We had a very poor understanding of the divisions within the tribes, the fact that tribes are not monolithic entities, and we didn’t understand how the insurgency overlaid onto the tribes and vice versa.’¹⁵

Yet a basic lack of understanding of local and tribal politics was only part of the reason why the USMC was prevented from engaging with Anbar’s tribes in 2004. At the operational level, their intent was derailed by the unforeseen events in March that year. The public murder of four US contractors in the city of Fallujah forced demands by the US government for a harsh and immediate response. The Marines’ pleas for restraint went unheeded and they were despatched to retake control of the city in early April 2004, an operation that would not be fully completed until late autumn and which would, for that entire period, suck in resources from the remainder of Anbar Province including the capital Ramadi. The Marines would be denied the ability to set in motion their particular brand of COIN warfare before the various elements that would come to make up AQI began to properly establish themselves there.

But while the events in Fallujah were perhaps part and parcel of the friction of war, even upon their return to the fray in Ramadi the Marines faced what was, realistically, the most important impediment to any recognisably tribal strategy. This came from the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) which, since the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, had sought to maintain firm control of any process by which Anbar's tribal leaders were co-opted into forms of local and national government.¹⁶ This control was compounded by the instruction that tribal militias could not be treated as independent actors by US forces.¹⁷ The CPA's position on tribal engagement possessed undoubted logic if placed against the grandiose ambitions of the Washington ideologues that had sanctioned the war but it fatally crippled the ability of US forces on the ground to speedily and unilaterally engage tribal power brokers as potential allies in the emerging fight against AQI. Denuded by continued troop withdrawals, American soldiers watched relatively helplessly as temporary gains were relinquished, and as potentially important tribal figures who proposed cooperation with US forces against AQI were isolated and killed by the latter. Other important tribal leaders, in the absence of any credible alternative, continued to provide AQI leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi with support in defence of their own self-interest.

For the USMC and a number of army units, Anbar over the period 2004–5 would indeed become reminiscent of Vietnam, simply not in the ways envisaged. Whereas the original intent had been to reprise CAP and Small Wars COIN doctrine in order to draw the Marines into a firmly political series of population-centric actions, the situation in Anbar by 2005 instead reprised the unfortunate dynamics of Vietnam as a 'control' war. Benefiting from an infusion of forces and a series of offensive sweeps through 2005, the Marines now largely controlled lines of communication throughout the province but their attempts to control the population in cities lacked any real permanence or durability, while Ramadi had been seized by AQI and declared the capital of its new Islamic caliphate. By the end of the year the situation in Anbar Province was, to all intents and purposes, a stalemate. The question was how to decisively alter this state of affairs?

The Anbar Awakening: The Narrative

As 2006 progressed, the USMC and elements among Anbar's tribal confederation continued to fight their separate battles against AQI. Occasional initiatives aimed at joining forces had been repeatedly thwarted by a lack of size and momentum, allowing Islamist insurgents to mount vicious counter-attacks on those tribal elements that did turn to

American forces for help.¹⁸ As summer approached and the debate in the United States turned to possible withdrawal from Iraq, AQI appeared to be gradually gaining if not ascendancy then at least some sort of permanence in its brutally violent attempts to dispute control of the province and further its ambitions of fomenting sectarian schism throughout the country. In the summer of that year, however, a rapid confluence of events caused a sudden turnaround. The first came in early June 2006 when Zarqawi was killed in a targeted coalition airstrike, denuding the Jihadist insurgency of his charismatic leadership.¹⁹ The second was the almost simultaneous arrival in Ramadi of the US army's 1st Brigade of the 1st Armoured Division (1/1AD) under the command of Colonel Sean MacFarland. MacFarland was a veteran of Tal Afar where he had watched and learned the fundamental COIN methods of 'clear, hold, build' used by McMaster. Now in Ramadi, not only did MacFarland's over-strength Brigade possess the physical resources to take the kinetic fight to AQI as well as attempt the durable reform of local security forces – the 'hold' aspect – but he simultaneously empowered subordinates to pursue an active policy of outreach to local tribal leaders, primarily in order to secure the recruitment of tribesmen into local security units.²⁰ This intense relationship-building led to a number of contacts among the local tribes but none more important than with the well-connected but previously overlooked Sheik Abdul Sattar of the Albu Risha tribe. Sattar, who possessed enough of an insurgent/criminal history to wield a degree of authority among his fellow tribal leaders without being senior enough to threaten them, would become the key broker between MacFarland and the dominant Dulaimi tribal confederation. The third event came in August as AQI reeled from MacFarland's offensive, now swelled by large numbers of tribal recruits into the increasingly effective local police forces. Concerned at further possible defections, AQI cadres murdered a well-known Anbari tribal leader in a final attempt to intimidate the tribes out of their increasingly overt cooperation with US forces. The response was instantaneous. The Anbar Emergency Council (AEC) of which Sattar was the figurehead was now swelled by the addition of five more of Anbar's major tribes. In early September a declaration was made by the AEC that its armed wing, the Anbar Revolutionaries, would now publicly cooperate with US forces. This would culminate in mid-September with the formal announcement, after a meeting between MacFarland and the AEC, of the Anbar 'Sahawa', or 'Awakening'; a marriage of convenience between US forces and seventeen of Anbar's tribes, including the powerful Albu Mahal and Albu Nimr tribes.²¹ Thus began the movement that over the following months would not only help destroy AQI in the immediate

vicinity of Anbar, but lead to the flowering of similar initiatives throughout much of the country. Over the following months 130,000 Sunni tribesmen, under the moniker of 'Concerned Local Citizens' (CLCs), flooded into armed service alongside US units. The tribal strategy, so remarkably transformative in Anbar, was now a central component in the US *modus operandi* for Iraq as a whole. Over the course of the following year the Sunni community took up arms against the jihadist insurgency in Iraq in the form of the Sons of Iraq (SOI). Tribal councils in predominantly Sunni regions would be bolstered by Sunni neighbourhood guard units recruited from insurgency factions in mixed areas such as Baghdad, and who would be partnered with MNF-I forces. By late 2007 the CLC/SOI were being armed and funded by the United States to the tune of over \$50 million per annum, while AQI reeled backward from Anbar and other strongholds.²² By 2008 the battle appeared to have been won. II MEF's Major General John Kelly declared that the USMC could legitimately claim 'victory' in Anbar, while commandant general of the USMC, General James Conway, would subsequently remark that the corps was leaving Anbar, '[u]nder a victory pennant ... We have crushed Al Qaeda in the nation of Iraq.'²³ As Petraeus was later to state, the attitudinal shift within Anbar's Sunni community during this period was one of the most important factors in the eventual turnaround of the security situation in the country as a whole.²⁴

The Anbar Awakening: Explaining Reality

The narrative of the Awakening is fairly well known, of course, but the problem lies in the fact that in many respects it continues to pose more questions than it answers. Although a COIN success story in certain respects, it is also a perfect case study of the myriad complexities that underpin a seemingly easily explained event. The first question to ask is precisely how and why the Anbar Awakening happened in the way that it did. The initial response from those keen to instrumentalise the phenomenon as a new COIN paradigm was to fold the events in Anbar in the autumn of 2006 into a broader set of events that spanned the period 2006–8 and which encompassed the broader Awakening movement in Iraq. The initial tendency therefore was to explain matters as the result of a combination of factors: the introduction in late 2006 of a new COIN doctrine in the form of FM 3-24 that prioritised proper population-centric methods; a surge of 30,000 extra troops plus the extension of tour lengths for existing forces which provided US forces the ability to both physically and metaphorically demonstrate permanence and intent; and various important mis-steps in strategy by AQI. All of these where

held to create the conditions that brought the Anbar (and thus other Sunni tribes) ‘onside’.²⁵ But the Anbar Awakening defies such neat explanations.

Firstly, with respect to those who point to the shift from mainly kinetic operations to population-centric COIN as the key determinant in drawing the tribes into the US orbit, they have to explain not only how the Anbar Awakening predated the introduction of FM 3-24 into theatre but also how the population-centric tactical and operational methods used by the USMC in Anbar throughout 2005 and early 2006, and which had supplanted the provocative and confrontational methods employed by the preceding 82nd Airborne, had failed to have any real effect.²⁶ In early 2006 the USMC itself stated that the situation in Ramadi was still best described as a stalemate, while, by late summer, 1 MEF’s chief intelligence officer reported that Anbar’s capital had been ‘lost’ to AQI, and that the USMC was no longer capable of defeating an insurgency in Iraq.²⁷ Indeed, such was the failure of population-centric methods in general that as Mark Lynch points out, in August 2007, nine months after the start of the Awakening, some 93 per cent of Sunnis still supported attacks on US forces, while 76 per cent of Anbaris called for the immediate withdrawal of US troops.²⁸ It is highly doubtful therefore that population-centric methods per se could explain matters. More accurately one could point to certain dimensions of COIN doctrine as a transformative ingredient, in the sense that the focus on information operations and dialogue by MacFarland et al. had helped create points of contact among key actors within Anbar, allowing the reshaping of perceptions and providing the image of an alternative reality in which the United States was a credible and desirable partner. But this form of tribal engagement was in reality the *antithesis* of population-centric COIN. Its narrow elite-centric focus simply mimicked the imperial technique of indirect rule, which ignored the mass of the local population in favour of a select few individuals that wielded power and authority. Except unlike the fundamental rationale of indirect rule, the United States would be depriving itself of the ability to exert any real direction or influence over its clients.

What then of the ‘surge’? By signalling that the administration was intent on seeing the war through to its conclusion, this supposedly drew previously wavering or even opposed local actors to the side of US forces; the so-called strongest tribe argument.²⁹ There is merit to that argument. As Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro point out in their study of the impact of the Surge, it provided not only the resources and institutional latitude required to rapidly communicate with and support tribesmen, but also, by making such initiatives a theatre-wide effort, enabled joint US and

tribal forces to properly cut off and destroy AQI cadres who would previously have simply moved elsewhere to regroup. Thus it allowed the crucial 'hold' to follow the initial 'clear'.³⁰ But the 'strongest tribe' argument fails to account for the events of mid- to late 2006 in Anbar. Much like the new doctrine, events here not only predated the surge but the tribes' movement towards support for US forces came at a moment in time – mid-2006 – when courtesy of highly publicised policy debates in Washington DC it appeared more likely that the Americans would soon be *leaving* Iraq. Indeed as one observer explains, the Awakening appeared if anything to be a response to American *weakness* rather than strength, with tribal leaders potentially perceiving that their new allies would perform the doubly-helpful duty of aiding the defeat of a mutual enemy and then promptly vacating the politico-military space, leaving it open to the tribes to do as they wished.³¹

What then of AQI itself, its hyper-aggressive ideological and cultural 'overreach' and its campaign of murder and intimidation as the major contributing factor for the tribal volte-face? The USMC, in its own 2009 study of the campaign in Anbar, claimed that AQI's forcing of an extreme Islamist agenda upon a largely secular tribal culture caused the latter to take up arms against it.³² Such a narrative was certainly promoted by ordinary Anbar Sunnis during the period 2005–6. Yet as others have noted subsequently, a number of the tribes that eventually turned toward the Americans had partaken in and sanctioned behaviours not far removed from those of AQI while previously allied to them.³³ As the supposed collapse in the relationship between the tribes and AQI due to the latter's brutality, this failed to account for the significant number of tribes that had opposed the jihadist presence from the very beginning, even before its more savage tendencies had been revealed. As Austin Long argues, 'the tribes did not change sides in response to violence towards civilians or their Anbar kinsmen ... [S]ome began fighting al-Qaeda at least as early as the beginning of 2005, well before most of the violence towards civilians and tribesmen in Anbar had occurred.'³⁴ More logical is the explanation that it was AQI's *political* overreach, with its declaration in October 2006 of an Islamic State of Iraq, that caused the Anbar tribes to turn en masse toward the Americans in an attempt to preserve their influence. But again, that does not explain the movement of significant numbers of tribal leaders towards US forces *before* this point.

Perhaps, then, the answer lay in alternative explanations. What of sectarian motives, particularly after the bombing of the Shia al-Askari mosque in Samarra by AQI in early 2006, which had drastically heightened inter-communal tensions and led to widespread ethnic

cleansing between rival Sunni and Shia communities, placing Iraq's Sunni minority population under threat.³⁵ But as has been argued, such a threat did not require the Sunni tribes to form an alliance with the United States in response. More logically it demanded the unification of the various competing parts of the Sunni insurgency as a whole to fight the common threat posed by the Shia militias. So what then of perhaps the most prosaic explanation of all: financial inducements? Surely the offer of vast payments and employment contracts made to the Awakening sheikhs and their men generated an obvious degree of self-interest on their part with respect to forging alliance with the United States. But this then fails to account for how and why the stupendous amounts of money disbursed prior to this point had failed to have any real political effect. As Lynch argues, the role of financial inducements in encouraging a change in behaviour could only have come *subsequent* to a drastically changed social environment that altered tribal calculations as to the value, in all senses, of US financial support.³⁶ In other words money may have cemented the US–tribal alliance but it could not have created it.

These various arguments and their inevitable discrepancies and inconsistencies matter greatly. Not because they prove particular positions to be right or wrong but because they highlight the reality that the leveraging of Anbar's tribal power brokers by American forces during that crucial period in mid-2006 remains a curiously misunderstood process. And perhaps most surprisingly, that lack of clarity is similarly exhibited by those engaged in the closest proximity to the Awakening at the time, who exhibited little grasp of precisely why the tribes had sought such a marriage of convenience, and even less as to what it might ultimately mean beyond the immediate tactical utility of defeating the insurgency in and around Ramadi. MacFarland, the individual on the ground in charge of conducting negotiations with the AEC, freely acknowledged after the event that he lacked an understanding of the true motivations of those he was engaging with, admitting that '[t]he Awakening was the sheikhs' idea, and I just went with it'.³⁷ In particular, he openly admitted that he knew little of what was going on beneath the surface with respect to Anbar's tribal dynamics, due to the blindingly complicated nature of the social environment there. As he stated,

I just decided, I'm just going to back a few sheikhs, and hope the other ones will fall in line to get money or whatever. That's how I'm going to play this game ... I couldn't learn how to play cricket. It was too hard for me in the time I had. I was just going to find somebody to bat for me.³⁸

Indeed, such was the complexity of the situation facing him in the summer of 2006 that MacFarland credited Carter Malkasian's 2017

study of the Awakening for allowing him to gain a fuller understanding of events.³⁹ And MacFarland wasn't alone. 1 MEF's deputy commander, General David Reist, admitted that tribal engagement was to all intents and purposes a matter of making it up as one went along.⁴⁰ In Anbar and elsewhere, American soldiers of all ranks expressed bewilderment over the dramatic changes that unfolded before their eyes.⁴¹

The lack of understanding concerning the motivations of those with whom they were engaging was a revealing dimension to the Awakening. On the one hand it was an inevitable consequence of an outsider being forced to operate in the confusing midst of a tribal society in a time of civil war where each component of that society competed or cooperated with others according to its or their own specific interests but simultaneously sought to hide or disguise those deliberations from outsiders. But it was also an indictment of an apolitical mentality at play. Although encouraging the Americans to alter the decision-making dynamics of important tribal leaders at a vital point, doctrine lent no encouragement to think beyond the immediate tactical priority of defeating AQI. So at the same time that American forces were encouraging the tribes to engage in a form of political revolution, commanders on the ground appeared to display little interest in the longer-term political consequences of that revolution, despite the fact that politics was an obvious preoccupation of the tribes from the very beginning.⁴² As part of the negotiations between MacFarland and the AEC in early September 2016, the latter had demanded the removal of Anbar's governor, Latif al-Alwani, as one of their conditions for joining the fight against AQI.⁴³ MacFarland had managed to persuade them to drop the demand but, five days later when the Awakening was publicly announced, the council voted to name Sattar as the rightful governor of Anbar Province. Not only that, but as part of their price for engagement the powerful Albu Mahal and Albu Risha tribes would be allowed to take over, respectively, the local Iraqi army brigade and the Ramadi police.⁴⁴ In the blink of an eye the Awakening had sought to transform itself into a rival provincial government complete with its own alternative security structure. Understandably, though, for MacFarland and others military priorities predominated. In their eyes the principal objective of US forces in Anbar was the defeat of the insurgency. Politics was part of the game but not part of the objective. Even General Richard Zilmer, commander of 1 MEF during the opening stages of the Awakening, admitted that while there were obvious signs that the empowerment of local sheikhs had potentially negative implications for the Iraqi government at a provincial and national level, his concerns in that respect were entirely subordinate to the requirement to defeat AQI.⁴⁵ Similar sentiments were echoed

throughout the chain of command. Despite its cleverness and its instrumental effect, the apparent success of COIN in Anbar disguised the non-strategic, non-political nature of its methods.

The Awakening: Consequences

If anything was required of a policy of tribal engagement, it was a clear understanding of what the tribes sought from the arrangement and what that implied not only for politics at a provincial level, but at a national level too. From the beginning of the American occupation, the behaviour of the Anbar tribes had always been shaped by narrow self-interest. Certain of them had allied themselves with the native Sunni insurgency. Some had cooperated with US forces. Others had moved quickly to ally themselves with the foreign jihadist elements that would come to comprise AQI. That tendency toward unpredictable self-interest remained even as the Awakening began and gained momentum. As Carter Malkasian argues, the Awakening could only be explained by a multiplicity of complex, unpredictable and often invisible considerations pressing upon actors inhabiting a social reality where the tribe functioned as a vehicle for the advancement of influence and authority. The calculations of tribal leaders therefore centred largely on matters of personal and collective power, relative political position and long-term economic opportunism. Eyeing their own relative influence within the broader tribal federation that dominated Anbar, by targeting AQI and bolstering themselves with American financial and military support individual entities could now seek advantageously to manipulate their position within that federation with the ultimate objective of reaching a position where local government officials could be sidelined in favour of their own political appointees and the tribe able to manoeuvre into pole position for the highly lucrative control of local resources.⁴⁶ And ultimately there was the tribes' long-term strategic objective: freeing themselves from an obviously dangerous, profitless and time-consuming civil war against AQI and instead securing, with the help of the United States, the political power required to protect themselves from the now dominant Shia political class operating under Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. From its very beginning in mid-September 2006, the Awakening was ultimately about the securing of economic enrichment and political power, and a marriage of convenience with US forces for precisely that purpose. As one notable tribal leader exclaimed to his American interviewers subsequently:

'We changed the Awakening into a political entity. We became a political movement ... We waged a campaign for the election, and we achieved

significant progress. We surpassed all the parties that used to be dominant. We will form alliances with the people that garnered enough votes to have a majority and form a government. This is the Awakening ...'⁴⁷

But if that wasn't problematic enough it would be a political movement built upon fundamentally weak foundations. In Anbar itself the very act of providing men like Sattar with such powerful patronage had been to elevate previously relatively unimportant tribal leaders to a position of pre-eminence within the wider federation, in the process displacing more established leaders from positions of authority and influence. This reordering of the hitherto dominant hierarchy would cause those that had lost out to seek to redress the balance in the years going forward, with obvious implications for tribal unity across the province as a whole.

It was apparent that the problem for the United States from 2007 onward was the fact that its chosen method of defeating the Sunni insurgency, i.e. an alliance with powerful Anbar tribes, was fundamentally un-strategic. It addressed a pressing problem but in no sense did it credibly contribute to the creation of a stable, unitary and democratic Iraq, which was still the stated objective of the US government.⁴⁸ The methods being used to achieve military objectives were largely antithetical to the political objectives at play. Some demurred of course, claiming that the Awakening represented the beginning of a pluralistic political tradition in Iraq.⁴⁹ But this failed to account for the fact that the country enjoyed no tradition of the sort. Inhabiting a zero-sum political climate that rejected any serious notion of loyal opposition, the preferences of the dominant political actors – in this case the Shia Prime Minister Nouri-al Maliki – would come in to play with severe consequences for the Sunni community. And once it had agreed to leave, the United States had no power or control over that dynamic. So it came to pass. The Sunni Awakening's transformation between 2007 and 2009 into a broader political movement resulted in two things: inevitable splits and divisions among the Anbar tribes as competitions for power began to bite, and the alerting of Maliki to a new and potentially existential threat to his rule from growing Sunni political aspirations. His response was predictable. Within days of the official American withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, his government revealed its malign sectarian tendencies. Senior Sunni politicians were arrested or hounded out of office while, fearful of the potential power of the SOI, Maliki loyalists now filled the ranks of the army. Police and Shia gangs began to murder Sunni militiamen. Dozens of Awakening candidates were ejected from parliamentary elections for supposed links to the Baath party, in the process marginalising whatever Sunni presence might otherwise have been in government. With the Sunni bloc now boycotting national

government, and with the United States absent, Maliki was free to splinter the Awakening as a political and military force.⁵⁰ Establishing patronage over some tribal leaders, he secured their support against others such as Rafe al Issawi, Iraq's finance minister and leader of Anbar's Abu Issa tribe. This only further factionalised the province's tribal community and damaged the authority of key tribal leaders in the Sunni public eye, a deterioration exacerbated by their no longer challenging AQI or drawing millions of dollars from the US government. The authority hitherto held by tribal leaders within Anbari society now began to flow toward religious leaders previously sidelined during the Awakening, including those previously supportive of AQI. This heightened religiosity, in conjunction with Maliki's heavy-handed response to Sunni protests against the government's targeting of the Sunni community, saw sectarian violence in Anbar in 2013 return to 2007 levels.

Into this febrile atmosphere emerged a re-energised AQI. With the Syrian civil war creating a sanctuary across the border since 2011, it had recrudesced, trained and recruited. Subsequently recasting itself as ISIS (The Islamic state of *Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām*), its combination of non-tribal nature, Islamic credentials and pan-state identity provided a powerful brand among disenfranchised Anbaris, many of whom became its local commanders. In the face of perceived government repression, many within Anbar's Sunni community who had been allied to American forces turned to ISIS for protection. With religious leaders now proselytising heavily, Anbari tribal leaders found themselves unable to provide any resistance to IS if it meant supporting a Shia government against the forces of Sunni Islam.⁵¹ Inter-tribal politicking and government repression weakened any likelihood of the former and IS continued to grow, killing those tribal leaders who stood in its way. Finally, in January 2014, at the height of sectarian tensions in Anbar and with the army committed to battle against the Sunni tribes, IS struck. Splintering a number of 'hollowed out' Iraqi army divisions whose performance was a stark illustration of the inability of the United States to create credible Iraqi security forces that could withstand the withdrawal of its own forces, the insurgent offensive sowed total confusion.⁵² Tribal unity had been atomised. Some aligned or realigned with the government but many supported the invaders. On 3 January 2014, ISIS fighters and thousands of people filled the streets of Fallujah for prayers. By the summer of that year they would be in control of Mosul and marching toward Baghdad, and US forces would be returning to Anbar.

Basra

The Anbar Awakening had revealed four things. Firstly, that US forces were capable of impressively rapid, bottom-up transformation and innovation when required, and that there was a hunger on their part to intellectualise the problem. Secondly, that the adoption of COIN methods had positively and decisively changed the dynamic in the *military* campaign against AQI. Thirdly, that even those most intimately involved in engineering the eventual alliance between American forces and the Anbar tribes in mid-2006 possessed little understanding of the latter's intent. And fourthly, that once the Awakening was underway, American forces had little to no ability to control the social and political dynamics that unfolded and which would ultimately have such serious consequences for Iraq's political and physical integrity. Tactical success had led, arguably, to significant strategic problems.

For the British in Basra, however, there was not even the succour of tactical success to sweeten the pill. In comparison to the American experience in Anbar, even its staunchest advocates would have to admit that in its fight against the Sadrists militias in Basra the British army displayed little in the way of innovation or adaptation in terms of either theory (doctrine) or practice. It is also fair to say that the eventual employment of a COIN 'strategy' in late 2006 to early 2007 made almost no difference to the security situation there. But the British experience did align itself with that of the Americans in two important ways. When it came to playing politics, British military actors were similarly unsighted as to the precise objectives of the Iraqi actors – in this case government and Sadrists – with whom they were dealing. And as they sought to engineer their own strategy – disengagement from Basra and the south more generally – they would suffer a similar inability to display any real control over events. Indeed, as they would soon find out, the success of their withdrawal strategy would rest not upon on their own shoulders but upon the complex and wholly unpredictable interplay between political, militia and religious figureheads in Baghdad, Basra and Tehran respectively.

Engineering a Withdrawal

Part of the British problem in Basra lay in its inherently negative dynamic. In political terms, while the British intervention in Iraq in 2003 had satisfied the grand-strategic desirability of maintaining an alliance commitment to the United States, the physical struggle for

control of southern Iraq became a mere abstraction: Iraq mattered in broad strategic and political terms but not in a way that encouraged decisive resolution in a military sense. The balance was to be struck between servicing an unpopular but short-term military commitment that satisfied the requirements of the Anglo-American strategic partnership and not being dragged into an expensive, time-consuming and casualty-intensive fight against a powerful insurgency.⁵³ That mindset determined that as early as 2004 the British government and its senior military leadership had essentially committed themselves to withdrawal from the south once a handover to Iraqi government security forces could be managed.⁵⁴ Handily, such a strategy sat neatly in concert with American designs. But the Awakening and Surge of late 2006 to early 2007 led the United States to commit to military victory in Iraq. The British objective now sat entirely at odds with that of its main strategic partner. The implications of this for commanders in Basra were hugely problematic. They now operated at the behest of both a government and the highest echelons of their own military leadership that had little interest in defeating the insurgency in southern Iraq, while simultaneously operating in partnership with allies who adopted entirely the opposite mindset elsewhere.⁵⁵

Their task would now be to create the conditions for a military withdrawal from a position of weakness rather than strength. The methods at their disposal would prioritise in turn military operations, negotiation and politics. The first of these would come in the form of Operation SINBAD, a five-month offensive in Basra designed to suppress Sadrist militias and help create the political conditions for withdrawal. The second would emerge in the form of the ‘Accommodation’; an attempt to compensate for SINBAD’S failure by negotiating with the Sadrist militia leadership in order to create an alternative route to that withdrawal. The third came in the form of the so-called Charge of the Knights, an operation which sought to compensate for the failure of the Accommodation by engineering an Iraqi government takeover of Basra. Each of these illustrated the willingness of British commanders to think their way around the problem in different ways, but simultaneously illustrated their lack of any really significant degree of control over the events unfolding around them.

The British Army in Basra

Critics have portrayed the failure of British military operations in Basra as the long-term consequence of an anti-intellectual approach to the business of population-centric COIN.⁵⁶ They point out that British forces

had never entered the city in a 'COIN' mindset, preferring instead to lean upon more recent experiences in the Balkans and Northern Ireland which minimised the recourse toward force and population control measures.⁵⁷ A more uncharitable explanation, one admitted by the British army's own official report on operations in Iraq during this period, was that the vast majority of officers and men involved in the opening stages of the war had no instruction in or understanding of COIN in any substantive sense.⁵⁸ Regardless of the explanation, by taking a low profile and assuming that it would lead to greater support for the occupation they ceded the early initiative to their opponents.⁵⁹ The rapid reduction of troops in theatre over the summer of 2003 dictated that there were insufficient resources at hand to both physically establish security *and* control the growth and development of local security providers, the police in particular. There was also little inherent ability to comprehend the minutiae of Basra/Shia politics. Their attempts to gain an understanding of their environment was compromised by slow and irrelevant information, much of it tactical in focus.⁶⁰ The inability of methods perfected in Northern Ireland to function in contact with an entirely different situation and culture meant there was little in the way of informed political intelligence. The lack of IT infrastructure meant that whatever information was provided could not be effectively collated or stored. Such shortcomings were further compounded by a lack of interpreters and language skills in general.⁶¹ The failure of civilian agencies to take up the required slack in this respect forced military personnel to engage with highly complex and dynamic political affairs, a task for which they were entirely untrained.⁶² Human Terrain Team (HTT) operatives transitioning from American sectors to Basra would point out just how seemingly primitive the British were in terms of attempts to understand the socio-cultural terrain of that city and surrounding provinces. Despite graphic representations and maps of tribal and militia structures, British data appeared to lack analytical insight and depth. There was also a seemingly marked absence of thought or opinion on the practice of population-centric COIN. There was no effort to build legitimacy among the broad mass of the population in Basra. There was no thought as to how to secure input from locals on how to staunch violence, how to engage in constructive dialogue and how to formulate new peace approaches. According to the HTT analysis, the British exhibited a marked preference for 'elite' engagement with militia and political leaders in preference to any form of community engagement and population security.⁶³

The criticisms were valid in certain respects but missed a series of important points. Firstly, criticism of a seemingly elite-centric approach

not only missed the fact that the Anbar Awakening had been to all intents and purposes an example of the same, but the anthropologists and social scientists of the American HTTs appeared to wildly overestimate the degree to which population-centric methods were responsible for the turnaround in Sunni attitudes. Secondly, neither the Jaish al Mahdi (JAM) nor the affiliated Iranian ‘Special Groups’, Britain’s opponents in Basra, could be described as popular insurgencies. They were the armed wings of heavily invested politico-religious actors.⁶⁴ Lacking popular support, population-centric COIN of the sort being advocated by the HTTs was thus irrelevant. Lastly, in understanding their problem as being framed by their own political requirement for withdrawal, the British *needed* to prioritise engagement with dominant local political actors, both government and Sadrist, in order to create the conditions that would not only allow that withdrawal but leave behind a safe and stable Basra. The real problem lay not in the adoption of an elite-level focus per se but in the fact that such an approach required proper purchase upon those elites as well as a commanding understanding of their intricate interrelationships. This is where British operations in 2007–8, which were required to facilitate a politically and institutionally palatable withdrawal, faltered.

‘SINBAD’

Operation SINBAD was designed to create a powerful narrative of British military supremacy, prior to withdrawal. A five-month-long COIN offensive running from late 2006 to the spring of 2007, it pitched military and civilian resources into Basra in an attempt to economically regenerate the city and improve its security structures prior to the British departure.⁶⁵ The militias would be dealt a blow, development projects would create economic stability for the populace and Iraqi security forces (ISF) would be empowered not only to participate alongside British forces but to take control of a peaceful Basra once they had left. But SINBAD was a failure. And that failure would be illustrative of the way in which the British strategy in Basra during this period was shaped and constrained less by government policy, the views of senior military chiefs or the intent of commanders on the ground than by variables beyond their control, in this case the interests of key Iraqi politicians which would serve to rob the offensive of its intended impact.⁶⁶

Their importance in this respect is evident in the delta between the British high command’s original intent in the form of what was originally termed Operation SALAMANCA and its ultimately watered-down incarnation in the form of SINBAD. In its original guise, the British

commander of MND-SE, General Richard Shirreff, had intended the specific focus of the offensive to be the JAM's Iranian-backed 'special groups'. These would be subject to a vicious and concerted pounding, thus allowing Basra to be temporarily pacified. Once that had occurred, the city would be handed over to ISF control and the British army would be able to withdraw with its offensive spirit and reputation intact. Shirreff's intent was clear. First and foremost the operation was designed to inflict a highly public defeat upon the militias and restore the now rather tattered reputation of the British army before it completed a peaceful withdrawal on its own terms.⁶⁷ But there were two serious weaknesses. The first was self-inflicted, as admitted subsequently by Shirreff who noted how the ultimate political rationale dictated that 'we had a strategy that involved extraction rather than necessarily achieving mission success. It was, in a sense, an exit strategy rather than a winning strategy.'⁶⁸ But secondly and even more importantly, the intent to decisively defeat the militias ran counter to the interests of the Iraqi government. Whereas the Americans could take the war to the Sunni AQI with the unbridled support of Iraq's government, the fact remained that Maliki's elevation to prime minister in May 2006 had been largely as a result of Sadrism support.⁶⁹ The relationship between the old-established Shia polity now enmeshed in Baghdad, and the upstart, working-class Sadrism movement operating in Basra was a delicate one and, although that relationship would eventually break down post-2007 once the Shia establishment perceived that the Sadrist had outlived their usefulness, in the fall of 2006 they remained a potent ally in a country that appeared to be descending into a sectarian Sunni-Shia civil war. Maliki's representative on the Basra Security Committee, Safa al-Safi, almost certainly confabulated with his leadership in Baghdad, specifically Maliki and his deputy prime minister, Mowaffak al-Roubaie, to ensure that SALAMANCA was rejected and that the Iranian-backed Sadrism militias *not* be subject to the degree of attention proposed.⁷⁰ In the words of Lieutenant Colonel Justin Maciejewski, one of Shirreff's battlegroup commanders, the revised plan presented to Maliki in the form of Operation SINBAD turned what had been a security operation with a degree of reconstruction effort in support, into a reconstruction operation with a security effort in support. A completely different focus.⁷¹

In the event, despite its billing as a bona fide COIN operation, SINBAD had limited, even counterproductive effect. Lacking any real Iraqi government buy-in and crippled by limited numbers of British troops, poor force ratios mitigated against any 'hold' as part of a clear-hold-build strategy, while the British army's confrontation with the Iranian-backed militias simply ramped up the violence on the streets

and led to heightened civilian suffering.⁷² Although there were some signs of effective ISF performance where it occurred, SINBAD failed either to materially degrade militia influence on the streets or to generate any lasting economic development, the quick-impact projects that accompanied it being woefully under-resourced. The operation would come to a close in February 2007 having failed to materially alter the security dynamic in Basra.⁷³ Although it would subsequently be credited with setting the ground for an eventual ISF-centric strategy for the takeover of Basra, Shirreff's intent of using SALAMANCA/SINBAD to proactively dictate the terms of the British withdrawal from Basra had been thoroughly undermined by the complicated realities of Iraqi politics, in particular the powerful linkages between a theoretically allied host-nation government and enemy militias.

The 'Accommodation': August 2007

The failure of Op SALAMANCA to create the necessary desirable conditions for British withdrawal from Basra led British commanders to abandon the notion that they could militarily dictate the terms of their exit. Their decision was aided by the knowledge that the incoming British prime minister, Gordon Brown, was not only highly sceptical of Britain's campaign in Iraq but was demanding an immediate drawdown and relocation of remaining British forces outside of Basra. The search was on for an alternative, rapid but non-kinetic, route to engineering a withdrawal without the city collapsing into violence. The emphasis would now be upon negotiation, with key interlocutors among the JAM engaged in that process.⁷⁴ In and of itself, such an approach made eminent sense. SINBAD had simply raised the levels of militia violence in Basra, and subsequent attempts to target the JAM specifically had resulted in the most intense assaults on British forces in three years. Shirreff's replacement, General Jonathan Shaw, needed to calm the situation before British troops could leave.⁷⁵ Considering the British presence to be a distraction that prevented the fiercely nationalist JAM from potentially turning its ire against Iranian-backed elements in Basra, Shaw's intent, strongly supported by the local SIS presence, was to remove that distraction and allow the JAM to take control of the city and defeat Iranian infiltration.⁷⁶ The subsequent bargain struck with the imprisoned leader of the Basra JAM, Ahmed al-Fartosi, which would come into play in August 2007, was the logical first step in this process.

The problem lay in the fact that the logic in this instance was based upon faulty perceptions. Although one of Shaw's first actions upon taking command had been to prioritise a detailed analysis of the JAM

in order to more precisely understand the loose coalition of militias that comprised the movement, the Basra Accommodation appeared to illustrate a misapprehension as to what the JAM as a whole stood for. In particular there appeared to be an overestimation of its legitimacy and consequently its degree of public support.⁷⁷ Some appeared to view it as a legitimate armed provider of social services à la Hezbollah; others used their experience of Northern Ireland to compare it to the Protestant Orange Order, a religious but relatively benign social movement.⁷⁸ Shaw, a highly cerebral individual, chose to define it as a primarily criminal rather than terrorist enterprise, a description that caused raised eyebrows and even open dissent when he presented his intent to senior US commanders.⁷⁹ In reality the British had completely misinterpreted the nature of the JAM's particular brand of criminality. It was not a Mafia-like organisation devoted to making its leaders rich.⁸⁰ Instead it was a ruthless, sociopathic and warlike organisation whose criminal activities were dedicated to funding a campaign of extreme violence for political purposes. The British withdrawal in no way caused them to modify their behaviour. Quite the opposite, it caused them to accelerate it. Once it had de facto control of Basra, the JAM not only swelled its coffers but simultaneously implemented a vicious policy of repression, particularly against women, many of whom were murdered for not following strict religious protocols.⁸¹ Its rule was defined by a tendency toward extortion, murder and ethnic cleansing, its activities now financed by control of commercial enterprises within the city. Corpses piled up in the morgues, many bearing signs of torture. No matter the wisdom of the Accommodation, there is no doubt that the British were unprepared for the savage methods by which the JAM sought to extend its remit. Meanwhile they had also been deceived by Iraqi government claims that their forces could control the JAM. As part of the agreement, Basra had officially fallen under the control of the Iraqi government in December 2007 but the police and military found it impossible to restore order, and indeed continued to be infiltrated by the militias. To rub salt into the wounds, Fartosi's eventual release that same month resulted in British forces being subject to increasing numbers of attacks outside of the city, whilst unable to mount operations within due to the terms of the deal. Violence in Basra only continued to worsen as militias engaged in a power struggle over identity and influence. The British may have engineered a way out of the direct line of fire but in reality the Accommodation not only raised questions of their understanding of their opponent but had simultaneously undermined the very institutions that they had promised to build, and furthermore helped cement militia control of the city.

'Charge of the Knights': March–April 2008

The failure of the Accommodation left British commanders confronting two unpleasant realisations. Firstly, that the situation in Basra was untenable. Secondly, that a British solution was now an impossibility; troop levels across the whole of Southern Iraq stood at about 5,000, and the political appetite for a confrontation with the JAM in a city of nearly 2 million was zero. Instead the British would now have to find a way to facilitate the Iraqi government's military defeat of the militias. Such a prospect was feasible in theory; by this point in early 2008 Maliki no longer needed Sadrist support in his campaign against a largely defeated AQI and was eager to quash his Shia political rivals in Iraq's second city. But attempts by British commanders to direct this process would again expose them to the difficulty of trying to exert positive influence over the chaotic interplay of vested interests that was Iraqi politics.

Much like the Accommodation, the Charge of the Knights made eminent sense in the context of the aforementioned limited force levels and the lack of public and political appetite for a full-blown confrontation against the militias. It also served the vital strategic requirement of helping establish Maliki's government as the undisputed political authority in Iraq. In return it would bring peace to Basra under the imprimatur of British influence, allowing the army to repair the reputational damage inflicted by the Accommodation and allow Britain a final withdrawal from southern Iraq with honour intact. But if the Charge of the Knights were to benefit both the Iraqi government and the British in the way that was intended it was required to closely follow the guidance and timings provided by its British interlocutors.⁸² In particular, because it required a degree of American logistical and technical support to succeed, it was required not to interfere with the progress of the their campaign against AQI in the north.⁸³ Indeed, the specific instruction from US commanders to their British counterparts in the south would be to avoid opening a second front in Basra while impending operations in the north unfolded.⁸⁴

Almost inevitably the plan began to escape British operational control. Originating in discussions in early 2008 between General Mohan al-Faraji, the Iraqi army commander in Basra, and his British advisors, the details of the operation were subsequently revealed to senior British and US officers in early March of that year in an effort to get institutional buy-in. Most importantly of course, they were also revealed to Maliki. Spying the opportunity to splinter and destroy the now rival Sadrist presence in Basra, he responded by immediately ordering an assault upon the city without British support.⁸⁵ The latter were suddenly cut

out of the decision-making process, with Maliki preferring to communicate only with American commanders in Baghdad. The speed of events not only unsighted the commander of British forces in Iraq who had in the interim departed on leave, but within hours of the start of the operation on 24 March the British Brigade commander responsible for Basra was still vainly trying to ascertain why Maliki had suddenly arrived in the city by helicopter. Only the following day, as Mohan's 14th Division walked into a maelstrom at the hands of the JAM, did it become fully apparent to the British what was happening; that their plan for the liberation of Basra had been hijacked by the Iraqi government and that they were powerless to intervene. Even on the ground outside Basra, Maliki refused to speak with local British commanders due to his belief that their prior politicking with Sadrist elements had created the present imbroglio, cooperating instead with the Americans as he sought to rescue the rapidly faltering operation.⁸⁶ Although a limited number of British units would be freed up to aid their Iraqi counterparts, responsibility for managing the military operation now fell, *de facto*, into the hands of the Americans. Maliki was advised by the US Corps commander General Lloyd Austin as to how to rescue the situation, while the USMC's Major General George Flynn arrived at British Brigade HQ on 27 March to inform them, in one observer's words, that he was there, 'to prevent them failing in Basra'.⁸⁷

In reality, however, despite their military hardware and advisory teams it was not the Americans who would bring peace to Basra on the part of Maliki and the British. Responsibility for that lay instead in the hands of influential figures within the Iranian regime. On 29 March, as the battle between coalition-supported Iraqi forces and the JAM descended into violent stalemate, Maliki authorised a delegation of senior Shia politicians to travel to the Iranian city of Qom in order to persuade the Iranians to broker a ceasefire with the JAM. On 30 March the Iranians, unwilling to be party to an increasingly vicious civil war within southern Iraq's Shia community, agreed to Maliki's proposals. In return for Maliki's promise that the Sadrists would be allowed to partake in national elections, Tehran immediately withdrew support for the JAM militias and the Revolutionary Guard-sponsored Special Groups and forced them to allow Iraqi army units to mount a symbolic advance into militia strongholds. Busy planning further military operations against the JAM, neither the Americans nor the British were aware of the negotiations then underway. On 31 March a ceasefire was announced. Although the JAM continued to provide sporadic resistance, the withdrawal of Iranian support essentially facilitated the Iraqi government's takeover of Basra

by June that year. Revealingly, Maliki's first act would be to arrest and imprison rival Shia political leaders.⁸⁸

Although the Charge of the Knights had been a success in ridding Basra of the JAM, that success could not have occurred in the way that it did without the initial influence of the Iranians over the JAM and their Special Group allies. The British had in large part been relegated to the role of bystanders as events played out in that first crucial week. Moreover, both British and US commanders had been utterly bewildered by the seeming unpredictability of Maliki's political calculations. Attempting to balance his relationship with the coalition against the precarious and zero-sum tradition of Iraqi politics, particularly in the face of newly emergent Sunni groupings and the internecine challenge of powerful clerics like Moqtada al-Sadr, his behaviour naturally centred upon securing immediate political advantage by whatever means necessary. His relationship with the Iranians and their shared interest in restraining a Sunni resurgence in Iraq was pivotal to deciding the course of events in Basra during this period.⁸⁹

Conclusion

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that in significant ways US and British military efforts in Anbar and Basra during the period under examination were often peripheral to the events that unfolded. They may have played their part in stimulating change, but their ability to control that process once underway was extremely precarious and often non-existent. For British commanders in Basra, the confusing and often invisible relationship between government, Sadrists and Iranians formed a toxic backdrop to their efforts. While criticisms of the British approach to military operations in Basra tend to focus heavily upon its conceptual shortcomings, i.e. little in the way of a deep understanding of local conditions, no real focus on 'the population' in any material sense and no attempt to think about or do COIN in the way that the Americans did in Anbar and elsewhere, the real weakness was an inescapable one. Namely the fact that whatever British objectives, they were still required to confront an almost insurmountable challenge: how to make *their* preferences count in the face of those prioritised by powerful local actors. No matter the various evolutions of British strategy and no matter the techniques dreamt up to use military power to satisfy that strategy, the only objectives and preferences that really mattered were those identified by the Iraqi government and negotiated with its Sadrist and Iranian allies/opponents. For the Americans in Anbar the inherent problems attending to the Awakening would be obscured by the narrative of victory against

AQI. But the problems were equally real. The subsequent much-promoted emphasis as to the value of highly culturally informed, population-centric COIN masked the fact that, in terms of strategic effect, it yielded, as Malkasian described it, '[a] temporary and uneasy stability' that only delayed the emergence of Islamic State for a period of time; a far more realistic appraisal of affairs than the initial paradigm-shifting victory narrative.⁹⁰ Furthermore, although the dynamic change in Anbar had occurred when US forces resorted to a policy of tribal engagement, this was simply a facsimile of indirect rule, an approach to influence-building that favoured an elite-centric, top-down approach rather than a population-centric focus per se. Overall therefore the Awakening was less an example of culturally informed population-centric COIN based upon a deep understanding of the social environment than an example of military forces opportunistically capitalising in the short term, and for immediate military effect, upon the coincidence of a number of favourable conditions. Such methods helped solve certain pressing problems but simply created others in their wake.⁹¹ In addition, the lack of any proper understanding of tribal motivations for going to war against AQI allowed a genuinely damaging blind spot to emerge. The evident willingness of many of those within the military and civilian chain of command to explain the Awakening as a consequence of AQI's *religious* overreach subsequently blinded them to just how receptive in reality many of the Anbari tribes were to the extreme theological agenda promoted by AQI. This only served to conceal the possibility that post-Awakening Anbar might still be a likely base for extreme Islamic militancy; hence why ISIS was able to establish itself so rapidly there before breaking cover in 2014.

Nevertheless, the immediate and inevitable 'lessons-learned' process so beloved of militaries the world over had quickly dictated that tribal engagement should now become shorthand for 'effective counterinsurgency' both in Iraq and subsequently in Afghanistan. Yet not only did this process occur before the ultimate political consequences of the Awakening had borne fruit, it only pretended to understand why the Awakening had occurred in the fashion that it did. Moreover, the eagerness by American military leaders to see tribal engagement as a broadly applicable 'strategy' regardless of specific circumstance ignored the very simple matter of chance. Removing any one of Sheikh Sattar, Captain Travis Patriquin, Colonel MacFarland or General Richard Zilmer from the equation in the crucial summer of 2006 would almost certainly have dictated that the Anbar Awakening (and thus the Awakening more broadly) did not happen.⁹²

Mention of Patriquin brings us to our final consideration, the importance of the historical perspective. As an Arabic-speaking civil-affairs

officer he had been one of the key players in the tribal engagement strategy employed by MacFarland's 1st Brigade in Ramadi. Tragically killed in action in December 2006, he had been instrumental in forming a relationship with key personalities in the Awakening, most notably its putative leader Sheik Sattar. The US army's 2019 official report into the Iraq War would subsequently highlight Patriquin's instrumental role in bringing to the coalition side a number of powerful tribes that many had come to view as irreconcilables, a role that would lead some to compare him to T.E. Lawrence.⁹³ The sentiment was touching. But the comparison was also eerily apposite in the context of the rise of ISIS and the events of 2014–19. Lawrence's reputation goes before him of course: the unconventional warrior possessed of a deep knowledge of Arab society who did the apparently impossible and brought the Bedouin tribes into the fight against the Ottoman Empire on the side of the Allies.⁹⁴ But the true lesson of T.E. Lawrence and the tribal revolt of 1916 was less about the mutual defeat of the Ottomans than it was about Arab political aspirations. By bolstering ambitions for independence but ensuring that such ambitions would remain unfulfilled, the British and French ensured the emergence of violent and disruptive forces that would turn former tribal allies into resolute enemies.

8 Political Warfare in Afghanistan: Helmand Province, 2006–12

‘Most people who think about Helmand develop mental problems, because the politics are so strange and complicated.’¹

The title of Theo Farrell’s excellent recent work – *Unwinnable: The British Campaign in Afghanistan 2001–14* – sums up the NATO campaign in Helmand in suitably blunt terms.² Responsibility for this unfortunate state of affairs, argues Farrell, lay at the hands of a number of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Endemic corruption on the part of the Afghan government which denied it the legitimacy required to displace public support for the Taliban insurgency was one. The proximity of Pakistan, which allowed its Taliban clients the time and space to regroup and direct their campaign largely free from interference, was another. And then of course there was the Western public’s tiring of the war which eventually in 2010 led to NATO politicians setting a deadline to end the ISAF presence in Afghanistan by 2014 (an aspiration that was inevitably derailed). When compounded by what Farrell saw as the final critical weakness, namely a fundamental inability on the part of Western actors to properly understand the conflict dynamics at play in Helmand, coalition success became impossible. Farrell’s diagnosis of these fundamental causes of failure, particularly those relating to Afghan government corruption, the support provided to the Taliban by Pakistan, and Western public fatigue with a seemingly unending war, are supported by numerous other analyses.³ But the point about Western forces lacking a proper understanding of local conflict dynamics is an intriguing one. Despite being held up as one of the fundamental reasons for failure in Helmand, Farrell goes into little concrete detail on this matter. That’s understandable in the context of a study tasked with narrating the entirety of a lengthy military campaign, but like many studies of the campaign in Helmand and Afghanistan, where it does discuss poor Western understanding of the operating environment it tends to focus on matters of tribe, culture and complexity as catch-all explanations for the lack of comprehension on display.⁴

Farrell's analysis in this latter respect isn't wrong in broad terms, but it skirts three important considerations. It discounts the importance of the historical 'hinterland' – the four decades of complex social and political upheaval in Helmand that preceded the entry of coalition forces in 2001 and which was absolutely fundamental to conditioning *local* understanding of the conflict there, providing Helmandis with a powerful and often confusing alternative to coalition understanding of the same. Secondly it avoids clarifying the messy subject of precisely *what* it was that the coalition failed to understand. And lastly as a consequence it doesn't pose the question as to *why* it failed to understand those things or, more precisely, why it chose to understand them in the way that it did. Why are these omissions important? Because they are critical to assessing the central theme of an important argument; that the broader reasons for failure in Afghanistan notwithstanding, the military campaign in Helmand was actually indicative of an adaptive and increasingly effective 'way of war' on the part of the Anglo-US forces engaged there. That even if the political class had failed to translate this into ultimate success, then military commanders at least could take solace in the fact that their gradual grasp of effective COIN theory and practice demonstrated the efficacy of the military dimension of the campaign. Ultimately, as Farrell argues, population-centric COIN had proved itself an adequate response to the difficulties and complexities of war in Helmand.⁵

This aspect of the debate merits close attention because an alternative reading of events challenges such a proposition. It would argue that a 'stab in the back' theory of failure in Afghanistan that prioritises the obvious errors and inattentions of the political class simply serves to distract us from a number of far more penetrating questions. If military (and supporting civilian) actors did not understand the root causes of anti-government violence in Helmand, was this due to the inherently complex and impenetrable nature of local Afghan society as Farrell argues, or was it because coalition military actors actively *chose* to understand the war in certain ways? In other words, instead of asking 'what did the coalition not understand?' should we instead be asking 'why did the coalition understand things in the way that it did?' Why did the things that mattered to the coalition throughout their occupation (governance, socio-economic development, the 'insurgency narrative') not matter to Helmandis nor describe the reality of their situation? Why did coalition commanders and policymakers persist with a certain understanding of the conflict in the face of mounting evidence that it did not describe the dynamics of violence on the ground? And what was it that conditioned this sort of thinking?

These queries are important. They suggest that coalition military actors in Helmand stood little chance of resolving the challenge presented by the Taliban. Propelled by their own understanding of what the war was about and consequently unable to properly relate to the reality of what that war actually meant to local actors, coalition forces found themselves locked in a sort of closed cosmos where military power and influence played out in a variety of clever ways yet sat divorced from the conditions that they were meant to address. Partly this was the consequence of the military being trapped by the distorting influence of its own celebrated COIN doctrine, one that would not only provide commanders with a false description of the cause of insurgent violence but demand in return their adherence to a largely unsuitable theory of victory. But military understanding of conflict in Helmand was never driven solely by the pages of doctrine manuals. It was also conditioned by the powerful desire to understand things in a way that accorded best with the core beliefs and preferences of a warrior class engaged in the process of fighting a war.

Helmand

The vast southern-central province of Helmand was the site of some of the most ferocious fighting of the coalition campaign during the period 2006–12, and the near-impossibility of pacifying its various competing elements in many ways exemplified the troublesome nature of the coalition campaign in Afghanistan as a whole. A rural and highly conservative Pashtun society where authority stemmed from a hierarchical tribal social system based upon landownership and an ensuing feudal patron–client relationship, Helmand had long been a violent sociopolitical arena, whether that violence be inwardly (inter-tribal) or outwardly (tribe vs outsider) directed. A turbulent provincial backwater; the centre of poppy production; a Taliban stronghold adjacent to Pakistan’s ‘safe-haven’ Baluchistan province – Helmand offered the guarantee of being an almost implacable environment for Western military actors post-2001. Yet it was into that highly unpromising environment that British combat forces were despatched in early 2006.

The sudden presence of British troops in Helmand was revealing. In a broader sense it reflected the lack of the clarity of purpose that defined the Afghanistan campaign in general, which was never able to square the competing strategic demands of NATO’s nation-building effort on the one hand with a much narrower US-focused counterterrorism campaign on the other.⁶ A similar lack of clarity characterised the deployment of British forces to Helmand. Indeed the only seemingly coherent

motivation for the British was a largely unspoken one, namely the opportunity to salvage a military reputation that was taking a battering in Iraq.⁷ By assuming command of the ISAF campaign in Afghanistan and taking responsibility for pacifying the challenging southern part of the country, fortunes might be reversed. But that logically meant deploying to Kandahar, the most strategically significant region in the south. It was Afghanistan's second city, it was the birthplace of the Taliban, and it offered control of the trade routes between Pakistan and Iran. Instead, by being outbid by the Canadians who saw deployment to Kandahar as a prime opportunity to advertise their own military relevance to the United States, the British were given the consolation prize of Helmand. General David Richards, the British officer who would take command of ISAF in 2006, later claimed, 'I've never yet had a good reason given me why that decision was taken'⁸

The lack of strategic rationale was compounded by a total lack of familiarity with the object of that decision. Britain was in a sense no stranger to Helmand, of course. It was the site of one of the Empire's most famous defeats – The battle of Maiwand in 1880 – which had not only resulted in the loss of an entire British brigade at the hands of a Pashtun tribal army but which had then gone on to serve as the inspiration for an oral tradition that would memorialise the event among ordinary Helmandis for over a century. It would guarantee widespread anger, suspicion and even hatred at the reappearance of the *Angrez* over 100 years later and have tangible implications for British attempts to build trust among the local population.⁹ But for the British in 2005–6, any knowledge of the region beyond dim recollections of regimental legend was thin on the ground. Senior officers conducted fleeting visits to Kandahar and elsewhere in late 2004 and early 2005, but neither afforded any real grasp of the socio-political environment about to be encountered. One observer described British preparation for the initial deployment of the first battlegroup in 2006 as consisting, initially at least, of 'interviewing every white person who had been to Helmand and who could speak English'.¹⁰ As was admitted in a subsequent paper delivered to the British Chiefs of Staff, any institutional understanding of Helmand was, to all intents and purposes, non-existent.¹¹ The first formation to arrive in Helmand, 16 Air Assault Brigade, would effectively be operating blind.

It was therefore patently apparent that at the outset of the campaign in 2006 there was no identifiable body of knowledge that coalition military actors could 'tap' into in order to make sense of Helmand.¹² There was certainly no identifiable body of knowledge, written or otherwise, that provided incoming officers with an in-depth understanding of conflict

dynamics beyond the evidence of their own eyes, i.e. a growing resurgence of anti-government violence across the province. It could be argued of course that such a state of affairs simply typified the information gap that usually accompanies the initial stages of expeditionary stabilisation or COIN operations. Certainly it appeared an inevitable feature of waging war in this part of the world. One report noted that perhaps even more than Iraq, Afghanistan presented a series of granular differences. Languages, dialects, and heterogeneity of cultures and identity rendered the 'human terrain' particularly opaque. The city of Ghazni, for example, had over 1,000 villages, each replete with its own leadership structures.¹³ Consequently, the most pertinent aspect of the question is the way in which coalition forces in Helmand – first the British and then the American units that arrived in support in 2009 as part of the Obama 'surge' – sought to address the knowledge gap; how they began to engineer an understanding of the root causes of insurgent violence and potential solutions to it.

Doctrines in Helmand

While a multitude of factors shaped the ways that coalition military actors sought to understand their operating environment, doctrine would become hugely important in shaping the coalition's understanding of and response to insurgent violence in Helmand.¹⁴ Regardless of the extent to which it was actually observed and implemented – and there were question marks over both of those in Afghanistan – in the broadest sense COIN doctrine still provided two vital things: a common theoretical understanding of the nature of the problem and a common set of principles designed to guide military actors through the complex set of considerations required to address it. As has already been noted, FM 3-24 and COIN doctrine in general has been assailed from numerous quarters since its emergence in 2006–7. The critiques are numerous, ranging from accusations of a selective and misinformed cherry-picking of history, to querying the intellectual and disciplinary backgrounds of those charged with writing it, and even the levelling of accusations of extensive plagiarism by its authors, to name but a few.¹⁵ Some of these criticisms are entirely fair, some less so. But for the purpose of understanding the problematic relationship between COIN doctrine and the war in Helmand we come back to two aforementioned points: how it sought to explain the nature of that war to those fighting it, and how that explanation led inexorably to a specific 'theory of victory'.

The first issue was tremendously important. Both the pre-existing British doctrine Army Field Manual (AFM) 1-10 and the soon to be

published US FM 3-24 used the observation of historical examples to identify certain characteristics that comprise the fundamentals of ‘insurgent methodology’; a fairly uniform set of practices and behaviours on the part of anti-government rebellions that can be seen repeating themselves across time.¹⁶ The result is a template by which an insurgency can be identified and understood. But as Hew Strachan observes, while generalised principles make sense for hierarchical organisations like armies, they militate against the exploration of difference.¹⁷ In this respect, perhaps the most interesting aspect of FM 3-24 was its derivative nature. Despite being cloaked by what appeared to be a thoroughly modern articulation of the subject of COIN it drew most heavily upon a set of theories and ideas expounded by practitioners such as Roger Trinquier, David Galula and Robert Thompson, veterans of the counter-insurgency campaigns of the 1950s and 60s and whose ideas were deeply rooted in the French wars of decolonisation in Indochina and Algeria, and the British experience in Malaya. These individuals had been indelibly marked by personal experience in those arenas and in particular by their exposure to the concept of Maoist revolutionary war. The dominant theory of insurgency during that era, this was a form of war that sought not the old-fashioned pursuit of victory in decisive battle or the control of key terrain, but control of the loyalties of the population.¹⁸ With the recrudescence of COIN theory post-2005 their ideas once again assumed a central importance. Of particular note was their base notion of both insurgency and counterinsurgency as a contest over the loyalties of an undecided population. This contest, it was argued, would be principally determined by the relative capability of each side to provide effective governance, with critical civilian loyalties flowing to whoever could best satisfy this demand.¹⁹

Why did this matter in relation to Helmand? In a very general sense it mattered because FM 3-24 smacked of a selective interpretation of the historical record where successful examples of COIN were held to be largely the result of administrative and economic initiatives.²⁰ This tends not to fit with a more recent and more accurate reading of the same events which tends to explain ‘success’ largely as the result of highly coercive methods of population and territorial control in addition to the killing of large numbers of insurgents.²¹ More directly, however, it meant the creation and perpetuation of the ‘insurgency narrative’ in relation to Helmand, i.e. the classification of the Taliban as a phenomenon whose origins and behaviours seemingly matched those of previous historic examples.²² It provided a reassuringly comprehensible mental picture of conflict dynamics, serving the valuable purpose of portraying the

enemy as a physically identifiable phenomenon separate from the population and acting in opposition to the public good.²³ Ultimately of course it fed into the notion of a historically validated response; if insurgency is at heart a challenge to government legitimacy then the principles of action that underpin its defeat revolve around securing and reinforcing that legitimacy.²⁴ Thus there was an inevitable consequence to the establishment of the insurgency narrative in Helmand, namely the equally inevitable decision to pin success in defeating the Taliban upon a strategy of bolstering the Afghan government's ability to properly administer that territory secured from the insurgency.²⁵ Only in this way could the physical defeat of the insurgency be transformed into a durable political victory. For military actors the consequence in doctrinal terms would be adherence to the concept of *Clear* (clear contested areas of insurgents), *Hold* (hold that space to allow administrative initiatives to take root) and *Build* (build those initiatives into a durable political construct).

'Clear, Hold, Build' – subsequently amended to 'Shape, Secure, Develop' or 'Engage, Secure, Develop' – has a rich historical tradition.²⁶ As a concept it had originated in French Indochina in the late nineteenth century in the form of the oil spot (*cercle*). It had guided British thinking in its COIN campaign in Malaya. It had done the same for US COIN thinking in Vietnam, especially after the establishment of CORDS in 1967. It had also been a central principle of US COIN thinking in Iraq post-2005. But it was also a concept typical of military doctrine in the sense that it was neat and superficially coherent yet at the same time utterly reductive. It took a process of immense complexity and reduced it to a simple mantra. But for the Western government and aid technocrats and for hard-pressed military commanders responsible for actually implementing that mantra there was an understandable appeal in its simple articulation of what needed to be done to achieve lasting peace and security. As one observer noted, it promised a 'virtuous cycle' that served to implant and then rapidly reinforce the control and authority of the state, evidently a desirable state of affairs if one is in the business of state-building, as was the case in Afghanistan.²⁷ Enhanced security provided by military actors provides administrators and citizens the necessary space and time to rebuild their communities. The creation of proper, formal institutions of law and order gives inclusive roles to important indigenous clients such as tribal leaders or provincial governors while the emergence of a professional administrator class begins to enhance both the integrity and plausibility of the state and its various institutions. Meanwhile, externally funded development initiatives create tangible material benefits for locals. The upturn in prosperity then further

strengthens the authority of the government and its institutions, which results in yet more legitimacy in the eyes of the civilian population and leads inevitably to the loss of legitimacy on the part of the insurgency. The result is a rapid return to peace and stability.²⁸

But this basic doctrinal premise of pacification via enhanced economic benefits and increased government legitimacy always rested on certain debatable assumptions when it came to Afghanistan.²⁹ As Jackson notes, outsiders operating in somewhere like Helmand tended to assume that violent resistance to the Afghan government was a consequence of the latter's basic inability to do its job properly; that it was the competence or otherwise of government machinery that defined the nature of the struggle there. What was generally not considered was the relationship between armed rebellion and the very composition of the political order at play, which in somewhere like Helmand revolved around far more opaque matters such as the role and importance of status, the way in which power, money and patronage were distributed, and competing claims over matters of justice and authority between various sectors of society, i.e. tribe, state and mosque. More generally, as Michael Shafer pointed out in relation to similar assumptions at play in Vietnam, the 'government legitimacy' argument tailors itself to the assumption that more government is better government. But this presupposes that government and populace share goals that will be advanced by greater government capabilities at the grass-roots level. Elites' interests and those of the population may be very different. Improving administrative capacity on the part of the former might simply mean greater harm for the latter in the form of increased governmental ability to collect taxes, enforce unfair land tenure arrangements, raise conscripts, etc. In short, improved government administration may mean better enforcement of the status quo, which is itself the insurgents' target and a primary cause of popular support for them.³⁰ In Afghanistan the insurgency narrative, one narrowly defined by the binary struggle between insurgent and government for legitimacy in the eyes of the population, struggled to accommodate this reality.³¹ What emerged as a consequence was a theory of victory that not only accorded with the requirement for a light-footprint and time-limited commitment, but also aligned with a set of core liberal beliefs relating to the curative effects of democracy, the enhancement of human rights, and the pacifying effects of social, economic and governmental reform. When joined with the insurgency narrative these potent principles not only set much of the wider strategic context for coalition engagement in Afghanistan but now forced a selective interpretation of the doctrine.

The Reality of Helmand

From the beginning, the insurgency narrative failed to explain the layered complexity of what confronted coalition forces in Helmand.³² Even the Taliban itself defied conventional analysis. Every explanation of its composition, objectives, ideology, recruitment, *modus operandi* and self-identification lay open to challenge. Its distinctly Islamic character drawn from the Deobandi tradition; its early roots in the Madrasahs of Baluchistan; its Pashtun identity; its desire for political power based upon Sharia law as well as its previous record in government – these descriptors hinted at a very specific and homogeneous socio-religious phenomenon. But the post-2004 ‘neo’-Taliban, with its powerful tribal flavour; its willingness to absorb fighters motivated not by religious fervour but by local economic concerns or those simply antagonised by the presence of Western forces; its choice to recruit across ethnicities, regions and nationalities in order to build numbers and illustrate broad appeal; its willingness and ability to flex when necessary on key ideological matters; its sheer difference depending upon which part of Afghanistan one was looking at – all of these signified an insurgency of a very different sort.³³ But in Helmand the difficulty of categorising the Taliban’s identity and objectives in some comprehensible and logical fashion was further compounded by the fact that their presence failed to sufficiently explain the violence occurring on the ground. Or rather it did in an entirely superficial fashion, which was helpful if one sought to understand the drivers of conflict in Helmand as per the doctrine, i.e. Afghan government and international forces versus ‘the Taliban’, both sides fighting for legitimacy in the eyes of the population. But if one sought to incorporate the role of earlier historical events in creating the causes of conflict; to recognise the importance of group and personal relationships and rivalries; of the intertwining between the Taliban and the very social fabric of Helmand and seeing the region as having been in the grip of violent conflict for nearly four decades by that point, then one would soon recognise that the words and concepts used by the NATO forces to describe what was happening there during this period were entirely unequal to the task.

A prime example of the way in which the insurgency narrative failed to explain violence in Helmand is provided by Mike Martin, an anthropologist, soldier and subsequently a cultural advisor to the British army in Afghanistan. Martin describes how in 2008 he, his then-military superior and the Afghan governor of the town of Nad-e-Ali were in discussion over what to do about the neighbouring village of Shin Kalay. The

governor had assured the senior British officer that the inhabitants of the village were predominantly Taliban. The officer, in return, had promised to do something about it. The next morning a British battlegroup engaged with the Taliban elements occupying the village. The latter eventually withdrew after a fierce gunfight, leaving behind them the wreckage of a burned school.³⁴ At first glance this minor incident fitted the orthodox explanation of insurgent violence. The Taliban were obviously seeking to challenge government legitimacy in the eyes of the local population by way of physically establishing themselves in an area theoretically under government control and destroying what it saw as evidence of government authority (a school). It transpired, however, that the ‘Taliban’ identified by the governor were in fact a tribal militia that had been raised by the village elders for the purpose of defending the village against local Afghan National Police (ANP) units. The police were being used by the governor to tax Shin Kalay’s opium crop. It further transpired that the governor and local ANP were drawn from the same tribe, who in this instance were locked in a dispute with the elders’ tribe. The insurgency narrative suddenly looked weak; this was evidently a local fight dictated by tribal self-interest. It then emerged that the governor had been chief of police in Nad-e-Ali in the 1980s during the Soviet occupation, while the Shin Kalay elders he was currently in conflict with had belonged to the local Mujahaddin cadre that he had fought against decades previously. The incident at Shin Kalay now assumed the even narrower dimensions of a personal conflict. What then of the destroyed school? Surely this fitted the narrative of insurgent vs government, with the former seeking to disrupt the latter’s attempts to provide public goods? Four years later, the facts emerged. One of the clans in the village had been so angered by the prestige bestowed on a rival clan by virtue of the school having been built on their land that they had paid local Taliban to destroy it. Yet when the Taliban command council, the Quetta Shura, found out about the school’s destruction, the local commander for Nad e Ali was removed from post for having transgressed the Taliban’s then *pro*-education policy!³⁵

The events at Shin Kalay serve to raise some fundamentally important questions. When Martin recounted the tale, he had concluded by asking the question: *how are we meant to define this fight?* The question of course was largely rhetorical. The intricate and counterintuitive mixture of personal and group identity/interests; the significance of historical feuds to the present; the destabilising ingredients of power, corruption and prestige and the malleable ideological commitments of key players – these had all combined to create an environment whereby the social forces at play were so opaque that they could not be understood by

outsiders.³⁶ But what *was* clear was that however one chose to define it – inter-tribal competition for resources, personal feud, historic rivalries, or a combination of all three – the events at play served to thoroughly contradict the insurgency narrative. What Shin Kalay had illustrated was how Helmand was being riven by a conflict that simply did not reflect such neat boundaries. This was a civil war, one shaped largely by historical preoccupations rather than immediate concerns, and one in which group-on-group conflict had replaced the neat concepts of ‘government’, ‘insurgent’ and ‘population’.

Coalition actors appeared to be stumbling into precisely the same trap that had confronted the United States in Vietnam, namely the willingness to categorise and understand the conflict in a particular way simply to allow the ability to operate in familiar doctrinally mandated terms; a tendency that may have enabled action but which at best simply created an entirely illusory sense of reality.³⁷ The critical weakness in the case of Helmand was the willingness to prioritise an understanding of the theory of insurgency over an understanding of perhaps the most critical factor, that the region was in the grip of a civil war driven by hyper-local, hyper-personal and hyper-historical considerations which framed the contest not as a two-way fight between government and insurgent but as a violent game of political musical chairs.³⁸ And the baseline doctrinal narrative of defeating rebellion through broad-brush economic development and effective government administration also ignored the reality of how an undecided population acted when confronted by the sort of situation playing out in Helmand Province during this period.³⁹ As numerous studies illustrate, individuals trapped in civil war desire certain things above all else: reliable protection, private gain and timely justice.⁴⁰ For those things they tend to look not to the untrustworthy concept of ‘government’ but to the reality of those who wield true influence in shattered political systems: actors such as warlords and tribal leaders whose expertise lies in providing protection and violence.⁴¹ As Colin Jackson states of civilian populations trapped in civil war, ‘[I]ndividuals are more likely to strike feudal bargains with known counterparties than stake their lives on formal institutions and foreign agents of the state.’⁴² Sherard Cowper-Coles, British ambassador to Afghanistan, 2007–9, lamented that ‘clear, hold, build’ simply didn’t make sense in such an environment:

‘Build’ seemed to involve chucking up a school and or a clinic and believing that such largesse would win over a grateful population. Time and time again, however, we saw that a frightened Pashtun population wanted security and certainty before they wanted anything else. They needed to know who would be in control in five months or even five years’ time. The most important thing

was certainty about one's political future, rather than quick impact development or aid projects of which there was zero evidence of effectiveness.⁴³

Injected into these complex dynamics was the destabilising influence of the outsider. As Martin and Malkasian emphasise, external intervention – either government or coalition – plays an inevitably aggravating role in affecting these dynamics in two senses: by potentially encouraging a form of coalescence as elements within that society bind together to fight the intruder, or alternatively by sparking a process of disaggregation as some factions move closer to those outside forces than others in order to enlist help in local conflicts (over land, or opium tax as in Shin Kalay, for example), a process that invariably leads to even more inwardly directed violence, and thus worsens the state of civil war.⁴⁴ The problem for coalition military actors lay not only in trying to understand which of these two processes was ongoing, but what exactly they meant. If interpreted through the lens of the insurgency narrative, then the process was reduced to a simple metric, i.e. the enemy was moving away from or closer to the government. But the historical, fluid and temporary nature of the interests and rivalries abounding in Pashtun society often rendered such analysis meaningless. Tribal elements might indeed be drawn toward the outsider. They might participate in the experiments initiated by the counterinsurgent – census operations, self-defence militias, local and national elections, development projects – all of which gave the impression of cooperation and increased support for the government. But the immediate and hyper-local nature of disputes typically meant that once these were settled the impetus for cooperation no longer existed. That process summed up the paradox of fighting the Taliban in such a politically febrile environment. They may have been a threat, but as Malkasian notes they were also often the glue that held various pro-government elements together.⁴⁵ Once the threat evaporated at the hands of the counterinsurgent, so did the glue. This was the reality of civil war in Helmand. But if that were not a complex enough picture for bewildered military commanders, there were other more prosaic dimensions to these local issues that defied the armoury of potential responses.

An example of this in Helmand was the rather mundane issue of land rights. During the Cold War era, Afghanistan's then-ruling Shah regime had sought to transform the Helmand river valley into a vast, fertile crop-growing area. It had been hoped that the ambitious US-backed canal-building and irrigation scheme would turn the province into the engine room of national progress; a modernising initiative that would transform national fortunes. But an inevitable combination of bad luck, corruption, ineptitude and a general lack of administrative expertise had instead

resulted in number of highly destabilising factors that would come to lay the foundations for conflict in Helmand over future decades.⁴⁶ An unforeseen consequence of the project had been the sudden influx of tens of thousands of Ghilzai tribal immigrants from the north of Helmand who sought to colonise the now highly fertile terrain exposed by irrigation. These outsiders now clashed with the established indigenous tribal population over the highly valuable land and water resources available. Not only did the government refuse to provide arbitration, but it further antagonised established Helmandi tribal leaders by enlarging the extensive network of government-built irrigation ditches and canals that threatened the latter's control of water resources, as well as settling thousands of its own Western-educated administrators to run the canals, further upsetting established social hierarchies. Land reform measures attempted by the Taraki government in 1978 had caused such an eruption of violence, as traditional landowners were informed that their property would now be parcelled out to the landless and disenfranchised immigrants, that Martin describes the generally accepted importance of Islamic identity to the '78 revolt as peripheral compared to the toxic matter of land rights.⁴⁷ The ultimate result of all of this was to fix the large and now landless immigrant community as outsiders in constant opposition to both the established tribes and government, as well as placing the latter two in conflict with each other as a result of the government's destabilising interference in Helmand's delicate sociopolitical ecosystem. Such was the context into which unsuspecting British troops would step in 2006, and into which US troops would follow in 2009: a fractured society with not only government and tribe at each other's throats, but a powerful cleavage between landless squatters and the landholding tribes who constantly victimised them, a relationship that would provide an inexhaustible *raison d'être* for conflict. As Malkasian, stationed in Helmand's Garmser district between 2009 and 2011, would note, the long-term effect of Cold War modernisation policy would be an alliance four decades later between a permanently disenfranchised immigrant community and the Taliban, one that would last the duration of the campaign.⁴⁸

The problem of course was that while the issue of land rights explained a great deal of the root cause of instability and anti-government sentiment across much of Helmand, understanding the significance of the issue didn't help the campaign in any material sense. By pointing to the hugely complex fissures that continued to affect Helmandi society decades after events, it simply undermined a simplistic but valuable insurgency narrative that helped justify the ongoing coalition presence in the country. Meanwhile, in an operational sense, an understanding of

such factors bestowed no advantage whatsoever upon coalition military commanders or stabilisation experts. For the former there was nothing in doctrine that could tailor a military response to the problem of land rights and the issues that spiralled from that. For the latter, a recognition of the significance of such matters to the dynamics of violence in Helmand was matched by their own unwillingness to raise the toxic subject of reform. Such proposals not only bore the taint of colonialism if they were voiced by Western officials, but the entire subject was a jealously guarded matter of sovereignty for the Karzai government which brooked no interference in such matters.⁴⁹

Understanding, and the ‘Unknown Knowns’ of War in Helmand

The issues outlined above are illustrative of the complexities of operating in Helmand. Complexities that, in conjunction with a blunt doctrinal appreciation of matters, explain some of the ways in which coalition forces found themselves wrong-footed in their appreciation of why things on the ground happened in the way that they did. Yet militaries never rely solely upon doctrine to provide them with an understanding of a conflict. Indeed, evidence of their willingness to observe certain aspects of doctrine over others or to only follow doctrinal principles up to a certain point hints at the alternative influences at play in shaping their understanding of the operating environment.

A clue as to these behaviours came in 2010 with ISAF’s well-publicised and rather chastening review of the intelligence effort in Afghanistan up to that point.⁵⁰ Theoretically at least, the various intelligence capabilities open to the US-led NATO campaign had been well placed to offer combat forces the sort of information that would allow them to at least attempt to make sense of their environment. This was particularly so with respect to the social and political aspects of Helmandi society, something that new HTTs in theatre could provide useful information on. But the conclusions of the so-called Flynn Report were startling. It described instead a thoroughly dysfunctional intelligence apparatus that had, consistently and over a number of years, abrogated responsibility for generating this sort of vitally needed insight in favour of the relentless targeting of enemy personnel. Nine years into the campaign, four years after it had exploded into a fully fledged stabilisation operation and a year since it had transformed itself into a full-blown COIN campaign, the report instructed ISAF’s entire intelligence infrastructure to completely reorient itself toward acquiring and providing knowledge about the ‘population, the economy, the government, and

other aspects of the dynamic environment we are trying to shape, secure, and successfully leave behind'.⁵¹ Along with these instructions, it exhorted its readers to think of the war in overtly political terms, i.e. '[t]o understand the war as a political campaign, albeit a violent one'.⁵² Such an instruction was revealing, but even more so was its logical implication: that over the preceding years the intelligence apparatus in theatre had neglected its duty to provide the sort of information now being recommended by the report because it had been busying itself supplying overwhelmingly 'kinetic' forms of targeting information demanded by operational commanders. Herein lay the central problem. Those commanders had spent the period since 2006 supposedly engaged in population-centric COIN operations aimed at delivering a political solution to violence. This in turn required the type of social, cultural and wider environmental knowledge that the Flynn Report claimed had been consistently de-prioritised by the intelligence community.⁵³ So what explained the lack of demand for it up to that point?

Regardless of the sophisticated principles supposedly underpinning the execution of stabilisation or COIN operations, observers of the Anglo-US military campaign in Helmand point to one consistent theme: a relentless commitment by ground forces to the exercise of violent force.⁵⁴ 'Population-centric' warfare, 'information ops' or 'development' strategies notwithstanding, military actors tended to display the habitual tendency of seeking out battle. As Cowper-Coles observed of the rotation of eight British brigades through Helmand during his tenure as British ambassador, each brigade exhibited precisely the same behaviours. First and foremost was the prioritisation of combat – specifically offensive operations – as the primary activity. There appeared to be little interest in recognising stabilisation or COIN as a political endeavour and even less interest in coordinating military operations with national political strategy. With military priorities firmly established, the brigade would then plan and mount a signature large-scale kinetic operation. Each operation would be lauded as critically important, yet each would achieve the same underwhelming result: the suppression of Taliban activity for a time but without any discernible change to the political landscape.⁵⁵ This pattern, suggested the sociologist Anthony King, illustrated that respective British commanders appear to have been driven not by the demand to link military action to political designs, but simply by the need to act, '[t]o do something decisive and 'appropriately military' irrespective of the political complexities of Helmand'.⁵⁶ The same accusation was subsequently levelled at American forces.⁵⁷ Regardless of the defining operational mantra of the time – stabilisation, COIN or the building of host-nation security forces prior to their departure – the defining military

response remained offensive and primarily kinetic operations. Despite the advertised differences in approach between them and regardless of the political situation in Afghanistan at the time, the successive tenures of Generals McNeill, McKiernan, McChrystal and Petraeus as commanders of both American and NATO forces between 2007 and 2012 witnessed a relentless emphasis upon military operations.

But why should both militaries consistently favour the application of brute force to a complex political situation? Some British officers with experience of the Helmand campaign put this down to their particular military culture; a broader disinterest in reading, let alone understanding, requisite doctrine.⁵⁸ For others, it was the fact that higher-level doctrine of this sort was often superficially understood and inherently difficult to translate into suitable tactical behaviours.⁵⁹ Sergio Catignani's examination of British COIN in Helmand suggests that tactical commanders below the battlegroup command level consistently struggled to understand how to implement a population-centric campaign based on key COIN principles such as 'protecting the population' or the use of 'influence', a problem that was subsequently admitted by the British army's official Operation HERRICK campaign study.⁶⁰ Hazy understanding of key doctrinal precepts, it was argued, often resulted in actions that were contradictory to long-established principles. Catignani proposes that this was essentially the consequence of low-level tactical commanders simply ignoring the innovations demanded by commanders, failing to 'internalise' the demands of population-centric COIN, and persisting with highly violent methods.⁶¹ Similar arguments are made with respect to US forces, particularly their cynical dismissal of the widely touted policy of 'courageous restraint' that accompanied McChrystal's accession to command in theatre.⁶² But while such explanations are plausible, they fail to acknowledge the potentially systemic nature of the problem, one that was dictated not by the military's misunderstanding of doctrine but by a far more powerful understanding of themselves.

The 'Military Operational Code' in Helmand

Colin F. Jackson argues that regardless of local conditions, expeditionary counterinsurgency or pacification sees Western militaries in particular following a predictable, three-stage approach. The initial stage is for the 'big', technologically well-equipped army to wage 'small war', i.e. conventional warfare, but simply on a smaller scale than would be employed against a peer enemy. This produces gratifying battlefield successes, but it does little to address the political dysfunction at the heart of the

conflict. The inevitable application of more resources has little effect. Consequently, militaries move on to a second stage whereby they begin to adopt more recognisably 'political' methods. This emphasises the use of psychological, informational and economic measures to control the behaviour of both the enemy and the broader population, the sorts of behaviours seen during the shift to a 'proper' COIN mindset à la Petraeus in Iraq in 2006 or McChrystal in Afghanistan in 2009. But these new techniques are still hugely compatible with the favoured paradigm of 'small war'. The political aspect of COIN can easily be accommodated without jettisoning a preference for the use of violent force. Yet problems remain. Although military forces can now exercise influence or even control of local politics through the application of these various violent *and* non-violent incentives, they find themselves unable to step away without that structure collapsing; a problem evident both in Vietnam and Iraq as well as Afghanistan. Now they are faced with the uncomfortable reality of having to recognise counterinsurgency not as a problem of one-way compellance but one of 'violent negotiation'. To achieve this the military must now adapt to the unfamiliar and highly distasteful realm of two-way bargaining, i.e. politics. But negotiating while fighting is an anathema. It signals weakness. It also obscures the metrics required to measure campaign performance. So although it offers the best chance of lasting success in COIN, it is also the approach *least* likely to be adopted. Even if adopted, it is likely to be done so grudgingly, and then jettisoned at the first opportunity. Violent methods prevail.⁶³

Jackson's theory is compelling. Despite being based upon case studies from the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s, it perfectly predicted the flow of events in Helmand from beginning to end: from the initial deployment of British paratroopers in 2006 in which combat was the defining activity; to the rapid beefing-up of numbers over the following three years, the limited adoption in 2007–8 of 'political' COIN by the British but with no change to the basic preference for kinetic operations; to the shift with the appearance of the USMC and their own hyper-aggressive methods that similarly allowed identifiably 'political' activities to run side-by-side with the continuing addiction to firepower; and then finally to the point post-2011 where any fully 'political' approach was rejected in favour of the prioritisation of special forces 'kill and capture' operations as the defining military activity, while the broader combat effort was farmed out to Afghan government forces or locally raised militias functioning under the moniker of the Afghan Local Police (ALP).⁶⁴ From beginning to end, the behaviour of Anglo-US forces faithfully followed the prescription laid out.

The best explanation for these behaviours lies in the role of what Jackson identifies as the military operational code (MOC), the core beliefs and preferences of the military profession. Although the relationship between these beliefs and actual decision-making processes is looser and subtler than the term 'code' implies, it influences the appreciation of particular situations by military actors in a way that is hugely instrumental. In the case of COIN for example, it adheres to the Clausewitzian model of war by assuming that the military defeat of the armed insurgency will create the conditions for the establishment of a favourable political situation. This leads to an instinctive adoption of the 'small' war approach. But here lies the paradox. Almost all military engagements between counterinsurgent and rebel result in a victory for the former, resulting in the narrative of continual 'victories' against the insurgency. This may indeed be the case, but in masking the lack of any real progress in a political sense it simply serves to delay the search for a more appropriate strategy in that respect. This is precisely the same dynamic that led to the repeated claim by successive ISAF commanders that each year would, on the basis of the military successes being achieved, be the 'decisive year' in the fight against the Taliban.⁶⁵ Even when eventually forced to accept the 'political' dimension of the conflict, military actors will only incorporate those lines of operation that allow warfare to remain the core defining activity, seeing little requirement thereafter to abandon this preferred combination.⁶⁶ Perhaps most crucially, any increase in resources will only exaggerate this tendency. Militaries only accept the need for a political perspective when they are deprived of the tools for war-fighting.

But this reticence isn't *solely* a matter of professional self-identity. The French army in Algeria understood that revolutionary warfare theory not only provided an 'answer' to the problem of rebellion but simultaneously provided important benefits to the French army in much broader bureaucratic terms. In a similar albeit different fashion, Western military actors in places like Helmand recognised the implications of 'political' warfare. It may be the most suitable way of conceptualising the problem but it remains a form of warfare that doesn't require warriors or high-tech, heavy-metal weaponry. Instead it requires soldiers to subordinate themselves thoroughly to political command and direction and to engage in long-term, high-risk, low-return strategies that involve them being thrust into less prestigious roles such as policemen, aid and development workers, and low-to-medium level politicians. None of these activities are remotely appealing to a warrior class.⁶⁷ David Kilcullen, the Australian soldier-scholar and counterinsurgency adviser to General Petraeus may have famously described COIN as 'armed social work',

but soldiers don't join up to be social workers and the MOC ensured that they avoided having to behave as such.⁶⁸

What Jackson had essentially identified was a form of solution aversion. When militaries come to understand what is required to succeed in COIN they reject the solutions that are on offer. Rather than not understanding COIN, they chose in Afghanistan to understand it in a particular, systemic way, and they did so because it suited their interests. Of course, as this study has shown, the military operational code wasn't simply a product of the war in Afghanistan. It was a signal factor in dictating the military approach to pacification on the North-West Frontier. It heavily infected the French army's operational approach to combating a war of national liberation in Algeria. It serves to explain in large part the curious addiction to conventional operations on the part of American forces in Vietnam. And it lends weight to observations that even the turn to 'proper' counterinsurgency in Iraq in 2006–7 masked a continued tendency on the part of American (and British) forces to prioritise methods of violent compellance. But the reason why the military operational code matters so much in relation to Afghanistan was that it was here that the new and sophisticated approach to modern population-centric COIN as described by FM 3-24 was meant to find its full expression at the hands of coalition forces. It was here, with the practice experience of Iraq fresh in their minds, that British and American soldiers had the opportunity to adopt a genuinely different approach to the challenge of countering insurgency. Yet regardless of doctrine and training, it appeared that their behaviours in this respect would be dictated by familiar impulses and constraints.

Political Warfare in Helmand

The way in which local conflict dynamics, COIN doctrine, and the military operational code combined to affect the outcome of coalition operations in Helmand is exemplified by three attempts at political warfare during the campaign: UK 52 Brigade's taking of Musa Qala in January 2008, UK 2 SCOTS⁶⁹ actions around Babaji in 2010, and the US Marine Corps seizure of Garmser in 2009–11. The first of these illustrated not only an adherence to the newly publicised population-centric philosophy of action offered by FM 3-24, but also a determination to understand, engage with and actively shape local political allegiances in order to enable the defeat of insurgent forces. The second illustrated a departure from the mean; a choice to interpret 'population-centric' COIN in a very different way and to pursue the classic policy of population control. And the example of the USMC's actions around

Garmser illustrates the delicate balance between the apparently enlightened principles of modern COIN doctrine in combination with a resolutely entrenched organisational preference for the use of force. What these three examples show is the complex set of factors that influenced the behaviour of military actors as they sought to grapple with the problem posed by Taliban violence. But regardless of their individual differences, they collectively delivered results that accorded neatly with historical experience. Initial and rapid successes propelled inevitably by a desire to properly understand the human and political ‘terrain’ led to the counterinsurgent claiming control of the objective. But eventual failure was inevitable. In each instance the control exercised lacked any real durability, and the objective gradually fell back into the hands of the enemy.

Musa Qala

In *Unwinnable*, Farrell recounts the moment in November 2007 that Brigadier Andrew Mackay, commander of British 52nd Brigade, which was shortly to deploy to Helmand, received a pre-publication copy of FM 3-24 directly from General David Petraeus. ‘He recalled thinking “This is it!” and ordered immediate dissemination throughout his staff and subordinate commanders.’⁷⁰ As Farrell describes it, of particular attraction to Mackay was the manual’s emphasis upon the counterproductive effect of violent force, the prioritisation of ‘knowing’ the environment, the importance of so-called influence operations designed to positively shape local sentiment, and the importance of the final ‘build’ stage of ‘clear–hold–build’. This would be the philosophy of action required to unlock the allegiance of the ordinary Afghan in the fight against the Taliban. In support of this markedly conceptual approach, the brigade’s command group now engaged in concerted study of theories of behavioural economics prior to departure for Helmand; ‘prospect theory’, ‘anchoring’, ‘wisdom of crowds’, the ‘framing of choices’, ‘libertarian paternalism’ and ‘reflexivity’ were some of the topics consulted.⁷¹ 52 Brigade would be the first formation into theatre prepared to approach the conflict in the sense articulated by Simpson, i.e. war as a form of ground-level politics, with all the attendant ‘political’ considerations to the fore.

52 Brigade’s signature operation, the (re)capture of the insurgent stronghold of Musa Qala in December 2007, appeared faithful to this newly intellectual approach, one that promised a badly needed triumph.⁷² The Taliban were routed in an impressive action that featured the innovative use of information operations as well as active political

negotiation with various Taliban elements in order to manipulate them out of the battle as well as sow division and discord among rival elements. The requirement to establish government legitimacy in the eyes of the population was conducted by providing Afghan forces a significant role in the operation as well as, once the town was taken, rapidly appointing a governor to better direct administrative efforts. Once the town had been secured, the coalition also set forth with a multimillion-pound plan to construct a local mosque, police buildings and schools, rebuild the district centre, and repair electricity infrastructure once the battle was won.⁷³ All in all, the capture of Musa Qala appeared a genuinely impressive operation whose 'political' approach contrasted markedly with the actions of the 'battle-fixated' formations, particularly the Paras and Royal Marines, that had preceded 52 Brigade in Helmand to that point. But this narrative was, arguably, largely illusory. Operation SNAKEBITE emphasised population-centric methods but the ten-day battle had still featured a starring role for the Apache helicopters, AC-130 Spectre gunships, Predator drones and B1 Bombers supporting a British battle-group equipped with light tanks, themselves using artillery and mortar fire to provide protection for a 3 Company heliborne assault force of US paratroopers who inflicted huge losses among the Taliban 'insurgents'. Violence retained a fundamentally central importance to the concept of operations.⁷⁴ Secondly, 52 Brigade didn't know the environment as well as they thought they did. The command level spoke confidently before and after about empowering platoon and company commanders to engage in the information battle.⁷⁵ But such confidence was misplaced in an environment so politically confusing that even Helmandi's believed that trying to understand it would cause them mental problems.

In the event, 52 Brigade's effort to actively shape local politics after only one month in theatre was highly problematic. Between them, British officials and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai failed to confirm the identity of the proposed district governor, Mullah Salaam. Karzai agreed to the choice, believing Salaam to be an influential Taliban commander whose defection would split the local insurgency. It appeared, however, that the 'wrong' Salaam, a small-scale and ineffectual militia commander with little purchase in local politics, was chosen by the British in error. Embarrassment was profound, but in the words of one intelligence official, 'when it was found out that there were two of them, everyone just shut up and kept quiet'.⁷⁶ The upshot was an unappetising situation whereby the 'wrong' Mullah Salaam began feuding with his tribal enemy Abdul Wali Koka, district chief of police, while his militiamen began extorting and victimising local civilians. Within a short period of time he was loathed 'by pretty much everybody'.⁷⁷ Yet as a reconciled insurgent

'leader' it was impossible to remove him without doing immense damage to the broader COIN narrative.⁷⁸ As for 'development' initiatives, these lacked any substance. As one scathing observer noted, the adjectives used to describe the economic reconstruction of the town subsequent to its recapture, i.e. 'significant', 'enormous' 'profound', were immodest to say the least. The reality, as reported by journalists visiting Musa Qala six months later, proved such claims to be 'hogwash'; an example of the over-rapid inflation of the 'success balloon'.⁷⁹

Furthermore, the superficially attractive tactic of 'reconciling' insurgents in order to weaken the insurgency would cause damaging and toxic side effects for 52 Brigade and its successors. In parallel to the military assault on Musa Qala, there had also been a separate attempt by coalition interlocutors working alongside the British to integrate 'Taliban' fighters (actually former government elements that had previously belonged to the 93rd Division of the Afghan army) into government service. This initiative caused huge offence to important local allies of President Karzai who feared being unable to take a cut of the lucrative financial arrangements supporting this 'reintegration' project.⁸⁰ Karzai was informed by his own confidants that this 'political' work being undertaken by the British in Helmand was designed to build their own discreet relationships with elements of the Taliban, out of sight of the Afghan government. Despite being an obvious fabrication, Karzai ordered the immediate arrest and expulsion of the EU political officer embroiled in the controversy, the hugely knowledgeable Afghan expert Michael Semple. Semple's banishment from the country would deprive the coalition of his vast collection of contacts within insurgency and remove a vital intelligence asset at a time when it was most needed.⁸¹ Meanwhile in London, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was forced to publicly deny that British forces were negotiating with the Taliban, and all discreet efforts at making contact with Taliban commanders were suspended. Playing at politics had not only poisoned the well of Anglo-Afghan relations at a critical juncture but simultaneously encouraged the belief among Helmandi observers that the British could be easily manipulated.

Even absent such complications, 52 Brigade's efforts at political warfare were being further undermined by other events beyond their control. At the same time that Mackay was trying to win 'hearts and minds', the coalition was doing its best to turn those same hearts and minds back toward the enemy. Hoping to frame their efforts in a way that would play well in London and Washington, Afghan and Western political leaders had signed up to a poppy eradication programme. But whilst providing a seemingly compelling strategic narrative on behalf of the Afghan government and coalition, it simultaneously promised to destroy the livelihoods

of large numbers of Helmandi farmers. With British forces already perceived to have entered Helmand for the purpose of revenge for their defeat at Maiwand a century beforehand, to have been subsequently accused of naive political trickery by Karzai and to now be implicated in the eradication of a vital source of economic gain for ordinary Helmandis meant that 52 Brigade's success in taking Musa Qala rapidly faded into strategic insignificance. Insurgent violence now escalated, the Taliban absorbing an influx of infuriated poppy farmers seeking to prevent the destruction of their way of life and in the process transforming the campaign from a stabilisation operation into a brutal war against Helmand's powerful drug lords. British forces would withdraw in 2014. Musa Qala would fall once more to the Taliban in 2015.

In some respects, 52 Brigade's experience was familiar to any counter-insurgent; an otherwise clever initiative that remained unable to link positive tactical actions to strategic narratives. The success of taking the town had been swiftly undermined by broader strategic imperatives that robbed the achievement of any real significance. But perhaps more importantly it was also indicative of the problems with the intellectual approach adopted by the brigade's command team. Pre-deployment engagement with the broad and deeply complex field of behavioural economics indicated two things. The first was an evident willingness to conceptualise COIN in Helmand as political warfare in the true sense; the concepts explained by scholars such as Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky after all are tightly connected to a modern understanding of how target populations perceive political choices.⁸² The second was the inevitable consequence of a military formation engaging with very difficult academic theories entirely outside of its core competencies. Its expertise lay in the application of violence, not the delicate adjustment of local political sentiment. Ultimately the incorporation of such concepts exhibited the misplaced belief on the part of the British in their ability to understand and thus profoundly shape local social and political dynamics. As Martin states, they sought to manipulate but were simply manipulated in turn.⁸³

Babaji, 2010–11

By the summer of 2009, the region of Babaji adjacent to the provincial capital of Lashkar Gar was an insurgent safe haven. When 2 SCOTS began operations in the fall of 2010 however, the situation began to change dramatically. In a matter of months it went from being one of the most violent areas of the TFH (Task Force Helmand) area of operations to one of the most peaceful. By the end of their tour of duty in

April 2011, 2 SCOTS had established a 'hold' over the area that would be successfully handed over to the successor unit. How had they achieved such rapid progress in pacifying such a violent enclave? This was the question motivating Ryan Evans, a US Human Terrain Team analyst who conducted a study of 2 SCOTS methods around Babaji during this period.⁸⁴ Had the unit delivered improved security through a positively affective form of population-centric COIN, i.e. 'hearts and minds'? Had they done so by killing or driving off Taliban forces? Or had they achieved such startling results through a 'third way'; by their determination to change local perceptions through a display of full control of the physical environment, and the population within.

Evans concluded that it was the latter. Most importantly he concluded that the 2 SCOTS conception of 'control' was a highly thoughtful affair, atypical in its nuanced approach to the concept of population-centric COIN insofar as it treated the local populace not as a prize but as an enemy, one whose decision-making process had to be influenced not simply by the disbursement of money or development projects, but through a variety of violent and non-violent means designed to adjust local perceptions.⁸⁵ The foundation of this approach was an understanding of the local actor's 'information environment', namely the conditions under which they would act in the way most rational from their point of view. What that entailed in turn was a conscious drive by 2 SCOTS to understand how the ordinary inhabitants of Babaji perceived their world and what was most likely to shape their decision-making. Evans was describing a complex set of considerations. 2 SCOTS command group was seeking to not only develop a mental picture of the world as held by ordinary Helmandis but simultaneously understand the notion of how rationality worked in an environment that might be described as basically irrational.⁸⁶ What they concluded was quite simple in itself; that the main factor in determining local behaviour was the latter's perception of who was in physical control of the area. But as part of that process 2 SCOTS would have to act in accordance with complex social theory that explained that control as the result of subtly varying techniques: inducement, coercion, persuasion and the 'activation' of commitments. Consciously or unconsciously they would seek to follow precisely those prescriptions over the following six months.

From the beginning their methodology was simple. Reject mobile, enemy-centric tactical operations in favour of a visible and permanent presence within centres of population. This was designed to physically illustrate an increased state of security to the populace and thus induce locals to return to their homes, and was cited as perhaps the most important factor in shaping local appreciation of the security picture in

south-west Babaji. British forces then built upon this positive state of affairs by recruiting locals into the AUP (Afghan Uniformed Police) units that manned the checkpoints, giving them a hand in the process. They actively chose to ignore the focus on Afghan government legitimacy by forfeiting proposed large-scale development projects in favour of small, cheap, quick impact projects seen to be disbursed by 2 SCOTS themselves rather than local political actors, and which were designed to reward desired behaviour. All of these actions illustrated an improving situation compared to that previously enjoyed under the Taliban. But amidst all of this 'indirect' action came perhaps the crucial ingredient in forging local perceptions of who was actually in *control*: violence.

Ultimately 2 SCOTS needed to understand how to precisely calibrate the use of force in such a way that it worked in an 'informational' sense, i.e. adjusted local perceptions in favour of the counterinsurgent. That required British troops to dominate the informational realm by using violence in highly discriminate ways in order to visibly demonstrate their control of the physical environment. That process would not only demonstrate to a watching people the consequences of non-compliance with ISAF, but according to social theory would simultaneously loosen the grip of the insurgency by denying it the ability itself to affect the decision-making calculus of the local population. Physical control by 2 SCOTS would also deny the insurgency intimate contact with locals, and thus remove their ability to apply their own inducements and persuasions. All that would be left then would be coercion, and indiscriminate, abusive coercion at that, which further played into 2 SCOTS hands.

What played out was the inability of the Taliban's offer of Islam, cultural values and shared national pride to contest the basic decision-making calculus of the local population when it came to the violent nature of the environment that they inhabited. 2 SCOTS found themselves pursuing an approach over the course of their deployment that accorded intimately with the theoretical explanations for population behaviour in civil wars: that behaviours were conditioned not by ideological appeal, strategic narratives, government largesse or administrative competency but by a personal, rational calculation of costs and benefits where daily life and personal safety were concerned. As Evans states, it would be wrong to completely discount sympathies and personal preferences for broader political order – these play a role and were referenced constantly in the interviews he conducted with locals.⁸⁷ However, as regards COIN operations these larger sympathies were not decisive. Control, or the regime of control, is.

Yet there was an inevitable 'but' where 2 SCOTS success was concerned. As Evans observed, if the theory of control explains that the

loyalty of the population is not required for the purpose of successful COIN, then it follows that the government/counterinsurgent has not necessarily secured popular support; merely acquiescence to a particular political order reliant upon certain structures. South-west Babaji may have been taken from the Taliban by the winter of 2010–11, a ‘hold’ that was strengthened over the following months. This did not, however, translate into support for the government. ‘We are not supporters of the Taliban. We are not supporters of the government. We are poor people; we farm. That is all we care about,’ explained one local. Another expressed his indifference as to who was in charge, just as long as there was security.⁸⁸ Ultimately, 2 SCOTS methods corroborated the fundamental problem involved in the application of this sort of population-centric counterinsurgency to the realities of civil war in Helmand. Clever techniques and the judicious use of force had effected a change in the population’s decision-making in favour of the government/counterinsurgent. But ‘control’ in and of itself couldn’t change the underlying problem of a shattered society that was permanently receptive to the idea of violent competition for political rule. If the insurgent was the next best placed to provide effective control, then the removal of counterinsurgent forces would result in an entirely predictable outcome. And so it was with Babaji. In the spring of 2011, 2 SCOTS would hand over one of the most peaceful sectors of Task Force Helmand’s AO. Within twelve months of British troops withdrawing in 2014, Babaji was back in Taliban hands.

Garmser 2009–11

The 2009 US ‘surge’ into Afghanistan would see the arrival of some 10,000 US Marines across Helmand. As part of that, the protracted campaign in Garmser district in 2009–11 would encompass a ‘full spectrum’ approach to COIN already honed by the experience gained in Iraq. Utilising the skills of a dedicated political officer in the form of State Department official Carter Malkasian, successive deployments by 2/8th and 1/5th US Marines saw them develop a highly nuanced understanding of Garmser’s political and social state.⁸⁹ They engaged in diplomatic initiatives among local power brokers in order to pursue an informed and highly effective ‘tribal’ strategy and thus create firm political allegiances with local interlocutors. In concert with the local Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), they placed a focus on the perceived absence of government legitimacy by recruiting effective Afghan government administrators to provide the local populace with goods and services at a level beyond anything previously offered by the Taliban, and

recruited hundreds of effective local police officers as well as forming small local tribal militias. They followed a population-centric aid and development strategy that expended over \$20 million by the autumn of 2011, creating paying jobs, opening shops and markets, allowing the construction of medical centres and the erection of twenty-three schools including one dedicated girls' school and a refurbished agricultural high school, staffed by 130 paid teachers and educating a total of 5,000 students.⁹⁰ And underpinning all of this they pursued from the beginning a relentlessly aggressive approach to patrolling, establishing checkpoints, killing insurgents and dominating ground. It was, albeit on a far larger scale and over a far longer period, a seamless combination of the contrasting techniques used in Musa Qala by 52 Brigade and in Babaji by 2SCOTS.

But even as Malkasian describes the arduous process of delivering a state of relative peace and stability in Garmser it is interesting to note that while 'step-by-step' COIN worked to an extent, results ultimately depended upon factors well outside the coalition's control. The kinetic battle against the Taliban, for example, was technically proficient but unwinnable; the refuge offered by nearby Pakistan allowed Taliban fighters to rest, reorganise and resupply themselves safe from attack. Attempts to fight the 'political' war, i.e. to build durable indigenous political and security structures able to withstand constant Taliban pressure, were hampered by the intimate, historical and highly personal nature of Helmandi society. This was enough to preclude Malkasian – charged specifically with understanding such matters – from being able to accurately advise the Marines and the PRT officials how to proceed. US efforts thus became entirely dependent upon the advice provided by local interlocutors.⁹¹ This meant that the political effort was not only in thrall to systems of patronage that stretched all the way back to Kabul but found itself entangled in the inevitable feuding that arose as rival claimants to influence began to challenge each other. Neither could it touch upon the structural changes that Malkasian believed mattered most, namely the creation of an effective, seamless and apolitical chain of command between district, province and Kabul staffed by capable Afghan officials chosen on merit and allowing rapid coordination between president, governors, police officials and the Afghan army. But just as the issue of land reform had proved a toxic subject for PRT officials, such matters were a question of internal politics, solely the preserve of the Afghan government and well out of reach of the coalition. But perhaps the most glaring example of the Marines' efforts being undercut by events far beyond their control had nothing to do with the complexities of local or even national politics. Rather it was the sudden

announcement by President Obama in mid-2011 that the US government would withdraw the majority of its forces the following year. This single statement caused the severest dislocation to progress on the ground, causing a thorough recalibration among Afghan ‘allies’ and the hitherto hard-pressed Taliban as to how long the ‘strongest tribe’ might continue to influence local affairs.⁹² For hard-working, hard-thinking Marines and PRT officials who had succeeded in creating the impression of a stable and secure Garmser and thus ironically contributed to providing the opportunity for policymakers to advocate a withdrawal, this was the cold, hard consequence of excelling at a form of warfare that, as Hew Strachan has termed it, comprised not so much a strategy as an alibi.⁹³

Such laments notwithstanding, Malkasian’s description of the events during this period simply illustrated a basic reality. The measures taken by US Marines and government officials serving in the Garmser PRT may have comprised a genuinely effective approach to defeating the Taliban but did not create the basis for durable, credible and legitimate political structures providing for the interests and aspirations of a peaceable population. Robert Egnell identified the problem perfectly when he posed a very simple question: If the coalition had certain strategic aims in Afghanistan – democratic government, human rights, economic development, security and stability – and COIN theory dictated that the obstacle preventing the achievement of those aims was the Taliban insurgency, would the removal of that insurgency allow those aims to then be realised? The answer was no. Afghanistan’s basic sociopolitical condition – the natural result of a society still subject to what was effectively an ongoing 250-year-old civil war – saw to that. Helmand was merely a microcosm of the problem. Constant resistance over time to external influence may have prevented locals being ruled by outsiders – be they government or foreign forces – but it simultaneously prevented them from ruling themselves. And if the insurgency was not the problem then COIN was not the answer.⁹⁴ As a consequence, the battle for Garmser ultimately developed into the creation of the ‘Potemkin village’ that so often becomes a feature of COIN efforts.⁹⁵ Beneath the veneer of stability imposed by external forces, the struggle for power, status and spoils continued. Individuals and factions carried on their competition for status, protection, advantage or control. But the Potemkin villages lasted only as long as the benefits of protection and handouts remained, and once these were removed the community would revert to its pre-existing state of violent political competition. Malkasian left Garmser in 2011 relatively optimistic that the structures imposed could sustain the progress already made. The US Marines left in 2014, rather less

optimistic. Correctly so. By early 2017 they were back in Garmser, fighting the 'Taliban' for control.

Conclusion

The argument that failure in Afghanistan was to all intents and purposes a failure of strategy is a powerful one. As Christopher Tuck notes, the lack of any obvious understanding or application of the basic principles of effective strategy, i.e. a clear and attainable end state, the provision of means required to achieve that end state, and unity of effort across various military, political, diplomatic and economic lines of action, has become the predominant explanation for the West's inability to draw the war to a close on its own terms. Innumerable commentators across government, the military, diplomacy and academia agree.⁹⁶ Tuck however disagrees. He proposes that the West's war in Afghanistan was simply a glaring illustration of a fundamental point: that it is far easier to start conflicts than to end them, particularly on the terms that one desires. Regardless of the quality of one's strategy-making there are recurrent structural factors present to a greater or lesser extent in all armed conflicts that constrain the strategies that can be conceived and executed. Ultimately, the argument runs, once the Afghanistan campaign was underway then for a variety of reasons it was unlikely that a more 'effective' strategy could be delivered.⁹⁷ Tuck's argument matters because it helps us look at the war in Afghanistan, and Helmand in particular, in a slightly different way. It doesn't underplay the obvious errors of judgement on the part of policymakers but it reminds us that these are always more likely than not. And in this respect the failings of Western strategy in Afghanistan matter not simply because that strategy was chaotic and imprecise or because it was symptomatic of a thorough lack of understanding of what the war was about, but because it pushed responsibility for answering these and other important questions onto military commanders and placed faith for their resolution in a specific approach to warfare, i.e. COIN.⁹⁸ And if the impossibility of resolving the big strategic questions at play encouraged a retrenchment into narrow military-centric perspectives, then those perspectives now mattered hugely because military commanders – in the absence of effective political direction – were effectively running the campaign.⁹⁹

The events at Shin Kalay, Musa Qala, Babaji and Garmser were important, therefore. In their own different ways they ask questions of modern 'culturally informed' COIN and stabilisation theory and the prescribed doctrinal responses that flow from that. In a broader sense they go on to raise interesting observations (positive as well as negative)

about the way in which militaries engaged in operations of this sort understand their role, and the reason why they might prioritise narrow and ultimately predictable modes of behaviour as a result. Certainly these events lend credence to the notion of a particular way in which Western militaries approach COIN; what they are willing to do and what they are not, and how behaviours witnessed in Helmand fitted into a *modus operandi* already witnessed on the North-West Frontier and in Algeria, Vietnam and Iraq. What the above case studies and indeed others in Afghanistan, such as Nawa and Sangin, illustrate is that military ‘adaptation’ with respect to the increasingly effective practice of COIN identified by Farrell and others only ever went so far. Information operations, psychological warfare, economic development, population control, hearts and minds, the formation and training of indigenous security forces; these were all indicative of an approach that bought into the notion of a political form of COIN, but one which simultaneously protected their status as managers of violence and prevented their having to enter the realm of ‘proper politics’, i.e. patient, long-term negotiation. Arguably, it was also a psychological response. The certainty provided by doctrine protected commanders and their subordinates from the hugely dislocating effects of being forced to apply lethal violence in an environment where nothing was as it seemed. Meanwhile, the willingness to characterise the contest as fundamentally binary in nature was seemingly reflective of coalition commanders and their subordinates undergoing a form of ‘cognitive closure’, whereby the unfamiliarity and ambiguity inherent to political warfare was replaced by the familiarity and certainty of military action regardless of whether or not that was the optimal solution.¹⁰⁰ Soldiers and Marines chose to understand the war on their terms in a way that reflected their competencies, their deep and inherent preferences, and their need to perceive a logic in what they were doing.

So too these examples of political warfare in Helmand studies accorded with historical experience. No matter the positive results achieved in the short term – generally measured by increases in security, development and employment – pre-existing societal pathologies and the sheer power of entrenched historical factors would see to it that once the regime of enhanced physical control on the part of the counterinsurgent was removed, those results were short-lived. Other operations elsewhere in Afghanistan would suffer the same fate. Marjah, site of possibly the largest coalition operation of the war in February 2010, would prove the point. The 15,000-strong offensive was championed as a prime example of the ‘government in a box’ philosophy. But within six months of the operation concluding, the newly installed governor had been fired, the population was still being intimidated by Taliban, and ISAF commander

Stanley McChrystal had labelled the entire endeavour ‘a bleeding ulcer’.¹⁰¹ Troops were still under attack and fighting until 2013. By 2016 two battalions of Afghan troops in the town were surrounded and had to be resupplied by air. By 2019 American forces were still trying to help Afghan forces retake the district centre.¹⁰²

Yet perhaps most important was the way in which the campaign in Helmand revealed evidence of a powerful paradox at play. Glaring shortcomings in the West’s ability to understand the dynamics of conflict in local terms provide plenty of ammunition to those who might argue for the further development of capabilities such as the HTS and equivalents thereof, or the application of powerful algorithms and ‘big data’, all of which might offer the prospect of unravelling such complex dynamics to a far greater degree. But herein lies the rub. As Martin observed, such was the very nature of the civil war in Helmand (and by extension the civil war in Afghanistan as a whole) that a true understanding of it was even more problematic than a misunderstanding, or even no understanding at all for that matter. Because a proper, meaningful grasp of the dynamics driving that conflict forward at ground level not only destroyed the insurgency narrative but undermined the entire rationale for the coalition presence there. Understanding the war on the ground in Helmand could never deliver success. All it could do was point out the contradictions and impossibilities inherent to coalition methods and objectives.¹⁰³

9 Conclusion

Over the course of the five case studies in this book, external actors sought to impose change upon a range of indigenous societies in order to satisfy chosen strategic objectives. Through an amalgamation of political measures and military action acting in combination to create a form of political warfare, a range of techniques were deployed to engineer favourable outcomes according to the preferences of that intervening power. Be it in the form of pacification, stabilisation or counterinsurgency, when coming up against populations that were perceived as holding the key to success these actors engaged in a variety of measures to both secure support and crush armed dissent: the offering of economic incentives and opportunity, the implementation of ambitious civic-action initiatives, the empowerment of key local leaders, the attempted reform of local and national governance structures accompanied a range of other actions designed to aid the betterment of local society. Alongside this lay the design and use of population control measures, the dissemination of propaganda, the use of psychological operations, and the attempted mobilisation of alliances and collaborators from among local groups be they class-based, tribal, ethnic or sectarian in nature. Underpinning all of these measures was the ready application of lethal violence when required.

In each case the external actor found that this form of political warfare promised much but delivered far less than the sum of its parts suggested was possible. Why that might be the case is complicated, but it is clear that failure in each instance was never simply due to the absence of the sort of detailed socio-cultural understanding promised by capabilities such as the HTS. So too better understanding, if and when it could be achieved, was never a guarantee of success; other important factors saw to both sides of the coin in that respect. Of course, advocates of the cultural intelligence agenda would make the point, and justifiably so, that their claims were never absolute in this respect and that for the most part their arguments paid due heed to the problems involved in employing any new capability in war. But it's not clear that their thinking in this

respect ranged much beyond immediate tactical and environmental matters. There has certainly been little in the way of deeper thought and consideration of some of the broader historical or philosophical factors at play, or some of the basic inconsistencies and paradoxes that govern the utility of knowledge in war and its ability to be properly instrumentalised in the pursuit of satisfactory outcomes.

A prime example of this was the final case study of Helmand, which in the sense of judging the utility of socio-cultural understanding in COIN was perhaps a perfect distillation of the contradictions inherent to the debate. Here the problem was *not* the fact that the social and political realm in that part of Afghanistan was so difficult for outsiders to comprehend and thus made military operations more challenging. The primary problem was that the preferred alternative was even more problematic. Namely that if the HTS or some other equivalent capability could somehow have unlocked the coalition's understanding of conflict dynamics in Helmand – and for Helmand read Afghanistan more broadly – then at a stroke the entire logic of the coalition effort would be exposed and undermined. More accurate understanding of Helmand would not have benefited the military effort there; it would have fatally eroded it. And what is true for Afghanistan was also true for Iraq, Vietnam, Algeria and the Frontier. Herein lies the problem. In and of itself the need for a greater understanding of the socio-cultural dimensions of any unfamiliar operating environment makes obvious sense. One would want and indeed expect every effort to be made by military actors to attempt this if only to allow as discriminating a use of force as possible. Ideally it would also allow the political dimension of military operations to function more effectively. And if warfare were regulated by simple cause-and-effect dynamics then this ideal relationship between greater understanding and more positive operational and strategic outcomes would be a logical one. But war, even 'small' war, is an entirely unpredictable undertaking. Multiple variables, visible and invisible, interact forcefully and unpredictably with each other. Outcomes are often counterintuitive. The lines between tactical and strategic success are thoroughly blurred. 'Good' outcomes on the ground can result in suboptimal or even disastrous outcomes in the realm of strategy. 'Understanding' is forced to function within this dynamic interplay; a theoretical ideal constantly buffeted by a range of powerful shaping factors. Again, Afghanistan serves as a case in point in the form of the now infamous PowerPoint slide presented to General Stanley McChrystal upon his assuming command in there in 2009. The image upon the screen presented the conflict as a vast, interrelated and highly confused constellation of various different actors.¹ Yet much of the subsequent criticism that erupted, when it

was revealed to the world's press, centred upon the evils of PowerPoint and the comic effect of trying to describe the war in such a fashion. Few seemed to pick up on the salient fact that the demented spaghetti-like picture of conflict in Afghanistan as portrayed on the slide was about as close to an accurate portrayal of things as it was possible to get. More than that; it was far simpler than reality. 'When we understand that, we'll have won the war,' quipped McChrystal. The point of course was that it couldn't be understood. The intellectual tools that the coalition forces took into contact with Afghanistan could never capture the full range of variables that would affect their fortunes there and could never inform, in any practical sense, a degree of understanding that would lead to the successful conclusion of the campaign.

The problem is unwittingly crystallised in a recent article by the political scientist Dominic Tierney. In 'Avoiding Nation Building, from Nixon to Trump', Tierney argued that the United States had to acknowledge the reality that the types of COIN and stabilisation missions described in this book will continue to be an ever-present military task. Modern warfare is overwhelmingly characterised by civil wars, and therefore virtually any future US military operation was likely to involve a stabilisation component. Tierney's legitimate point was that COIN and stabilisation missions are the unavoidable price of an active and often values-driven engagement with an imperfect world. But more interesting was his proposed remedy. That instead of denying this reality, policy-makers and senior commanders should instead arm the US with a military machine that does such things better. As he states, 'Officials should accept the inherent relationship between military operations and stabilisation endeavours ... [T]he goal is to develop the American military into an institution that is exceptionally skilled at nation-building and then utilize this capability with great discretion.' This, he proposed, was to be done by enhancing stabilisation capabilities, notably cultural and language training programmes, special operations forces, and committing to institutional learning from past counterinsurgency campaigns.²

Tierney's recommendations are interesting. The call for a more adept military machine in this respect makes sense. But it also presupposes that the difficulties identified are primarily matters that can be rectified by the adjustment of organisational structures, new and improved technical capabilities, and increased and better 'understanding'. That may be feasible in some instances, such as small, time-limited and self-contained interventions like Grenada (1983) or Panama (1989). But as the scale and ambition of the intervention grows in cases such as Iraq or Afghanistan, so the task begins to pose challenges that are likely to dwarf such tinkering to the extent that things like 'better' cultural and language

training or deeper understanding of past campaigns is often of questionable benefit. And the reason is those (often invisible) buffeting forces that continually throw our ambitions off track: things such as the confusing and often counterintuitive results that accrue from the use of military power when applied against something as reflexively complex as indigenous society; the often unhelpful influence of doctrine in shaping military understanding of the motivations of local actors in complex civil wars; and the cognitive frames and institutional biases that dictate both the worldview and self-perception of military actors themselves. Such things heap additional yet often imperceptible factors onto an already immensely complicated task. This is why at its outset this book echoed John Lewis Gaddis's call to treat history in a more 'ecological' fashion, in a way that saw events as thoroughly interconnected in time and space and which would enable us to think more profitably about past events. It may not be immediately apparent to those who prefer easy solutions to their problems, but such a method genuinely offers the prospect of a more realistic appreciation of what some of the real problems are.

As an example, the interconnections between past and present by way of the imperialist theme that has permeated much of this study genuinely help us understand modern events more clearly. At its outset this book listed a number of recurring features of the practice of armed imperialism. Firstly, the inevitable emergence of violent resistance to our presence. Secondly, the often deeply hypocritical nature of our designs. Thirdly, the confluence of these first two problems in sapping domestic support (public and political) for such enterprises. Fourthly, the requirement for a significant temporal and physical commitment in order to achieve meaningful levels of control over (as well as 'positive' change within) target societies. Fifthly, the potentially destructive nature of our own ideals and values when forced upon those other societies. And lastly, the fundamental problem of trying to make one's own interests count vis-à-vis those of powerful local clients. In each of the case studies featured, these conditions consistently imposed themselves upon proceedings. In each instance, violent resistance to 'Western' designs was seemingly unavoidable. The trumpeting by intervening actors as to their enlightened values and their promotion of 'civilisation' was overshadowed by the oppressive and violent means needed to make those things stick. Rising levels of public and political opposition in the metropole sapped political will. The sheer cost in 'blood and treasure' reflected the resources needed to try to make even modest designs, let alone the often-transformational designs envisaged by policymakers, take root. As for those designs, they often portended significant upheaval and damage to indigenous society. And in each case the intervening actor, when

forced to try to achieve its aims in partnership with local clients, found its own objectives and preferences coming a distant second to those of the latter.

In big handfuls then, some of the 'invisible' lessons of imperialism still matter. The fallacy of the 'light touch' shows us that if one seeks to remake or recast another society, then a limited footprint simply doesn't work. Quite the opposite: the effective satisfaction of an outsider's interests in this respect demands intrusion and lengthy commitment. The decapitation of the Ghaddafi regime in 2011 and the subsequent attempt to turn Libya into a democracy simply by ignoring what followed illustrates the fallacy of ignoring that lesson. What else? Well, routine violence is an inescapable factor in governing conquered spaces. It is the vehicle through which the conqueror exerts their will and it is pretty much the only method by which the conquered regain their self-respect and their agency. Another observation too: although imperialism may be a contest between the strong and the weak, when the strong seek allies among the weak in order to achieve their objectives, the power relationship between the two may well be inverted depending upon the stakes at play.³ Moreover, the greater the stakes the greater the likely inversion. Even the notion of 'legitimacy' has connotations similar to those of the imperial era. For imperialists, the ability to understand those that they had conquered proved to onlookers the superiority of the Western tradition of scientific reason over native traditions of superstition and custom, and in so doing proved the ultimate rightness of the imperial cause. The modern counterinsurgent uses their drive to understand as a way of creating legitimacy in similar ways. By helping to empower indigenous actors within the intervening power's political designs, it attempts to give the latter a veneer of acceptability and thus 'rightness'.

Of course, it's unlikely that the imperial analogy sits well with modern Western policymakers and the militaries that act on their behalf. That's entirely understandable. The deceptive association between imperialism and physical empire obstructs the ability to perceive modern foreign policy actions as 'imperial' in nature. Moreover the accusatory nature of the term when weaponised by critics, which often embodies on their part an unthinking and reflexive opposition to Western foreign policy and military interventions in principle, one that can too easily conflate legitimate criticism with blanket assertion of inherently malign intentions, creates an antagonistic response to the 'anti-imperial' cohort. There is also no doubt a residual memory, in the United States in particular, of the way in which some neoconservative pundits and commentators actively embraced the imperial agenda post-9/11, to eventual disastrous effect.⁴ Some may also argue that attempts to prove the relevance of the

imperial experience to modern military operations risks forcing two very different things together in order to prove a point. There is some merit to that position. The almost unrestricted levels of violence exercised by the French army in Algeria during the 1950s and the zero-sum nature of French designs during that campaign seem far removed and potentially irrelevant if looking at coalition interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan, when the entire tone of those interventions was defined (in narrative terms at least) by liberation, not oppression. Neither – despite a number of instances of brutality or collateral damage – did coalition military forces engaged in those latter operations behave in a way that was remotely comparable to how German colonial forces behaved in South-West and East Africa in the early 1900s, for example, in terms of the latter's seeming addiction to indiscriminate killing.⁵ And if one places these obvious differences alongside an understanding of 'Empire' as merely a way of ensuring the physical domination of territories and peoples, then one can legitimately argue that there is little of relevance to be learned by comparing the British experience on the Indian Frontier in the early twentieth century with that of the US Marines in Garmser over a century later.

But such arguments risks missing the point in two ways. Firstly those aforementioned policymakers and military actors shouldn't be afraid to accommodate the concept of imperialism within their thinking as a way of making sense of certain forms of action, particularly if one understands the term as one of academic explanation rather than simply objecting to the loaded moral or ideological implications associated with it. That way one is provided with a useful way of rationalising one's actions and similarly provided with an even more useful understanding of the likely implications of them. If American policymakers during Vietnam had understood their attempted reconstruction of the village 'system' in the south as related to the actions of French colonialists seeking to establish their own forms of indirect influence among the rural population of Indochina, they might have seen how the effects of those earlier efforts would directly affect their own fortunes six or seven decades later.⁶ Secondly, on the latter point of the evident difference between 'imperial warfare' then and now one is proposing an argument that is essentially akin to the philosophical debate over the character versus the nature of war. Academics and military officers accept in general the Clausewitzian principle that different conflicts may vary wildly in terms of their character, i.e. in the composition of protagonists and their modes of fighting, but that the nature of the contest, i.e. a political act defined by the unpredictable interaction between the forces of violence, reason and chance, essentially stays constant.⁷ In the same way the differences

between the activities of Western forces during the heyday of imperialism and what we saw more recently in places such as Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan is essentially a difference in character. In terms of nature however, the dominant theme that emerges, i.e. a values-driven attempt to change another seemingly inferior society by force, suggests far greater commonality across the eras.

Of course, the imperial aspect is only one aspect of this study and should not serve to disguise other dimensions of the debate, notably some of the practical issues confronting the export of power in these circumstances and some of the assumptions underpinning what can be an incredibly ambitious process. David H. Price framed it well when he described the concept of 'simple' counterinsurgency. The term 'simple' in reference to COIN may seem a ludicrous and possibly insulting proposition to military practitioners or anyone else with experience of such matters, but Price's point is a considered one. Cultural intelligence can provide military actors and others the ability to reduce frictions, i.e. to acknowledge and respect local customs and mores, to enforce law and order, to deliver certain desired services, i.e. it can help smooth the interaction between counterinsurgent and population, or between counterinsurgent and host nation elements. It may also provide information necessary to identify those individuals or groups that counterinsurgents need to factor into their decision-making, be they friend, enemy or possessed of the potential to turn from one to the other. In other words, it allows counterinsurgents or nation-builders the ability to more effectively navigate themselves around the contours of local society in a relatively passive sense. And to the extent that the proponents of military 'anthropology' or big data base their claims of inherent value along these relatively simple lines, they have a strong case in their defence. The problem comes when they lend their expertise to the grandiose ambitions of modern COIN doctrine, and indeed any other sort of doctrine that promises the ability not only to defeat insurgency by way of transforming military actors into political actors but to culturally engineer whole societies in the process. This is where 'understanding' stops being the simple provision of information and starts to become an instrument of violent and unpredictable change.

Parallels in this respect can be drawn with the instrumentalising of aid or development money in the same sorts of scenarios. On the surface this would appear – like the enhancement of cultural intelligence – to be a logical way of facilitating the increase of government or counterinsurgent influence among a contested population. The building of hospitals, clinics and schools, of transport, government and commercial infrastructure, and the encouragement of new forms of economic activity to

provide both income and employment would all seem to be logical steps for anyone seeking to pacify a hostile or wavering population. Indeed, US army doctrine *specifically* describes money as a weaponised form of influence.⁸ But it's just not that simple. The use of aid/development as a method of pacification or stabilisation is hostage to such a multiplicity of competing and complicating factors that all sorts of odd and potentially counterproductive outcomes can accrue. Is it PRT development aid or civilian aid? The former, because of the type of aid generally dispensed by PRTs, often causes levels of insurgent violence to rise, rather than fall.⁹ If it's civilian aid, then what sector is that aid assisting? Is it being used to build government infrastructure, a hospital or a school? If the former, then violence is almost certainly likely to increase in a given area. If the latter, then it may well increase but then again it may not, dependent upon specific variations in insurgent ideology, a matter usually well beyond a counterinsurgent's control.¹⁰ Furthermore, if this civilian aid is applied to an area *not* under prior control, violence is likely to rise. If already under military control, violence will generally decrease but that money will not in itself facilitate the establishment of control; control has to precede effect in this instance.¹¹ The matter is complex, and prone to delivering highly counterintuitive outcomes.

What is perhaps one of the most interesting features throughout the book, however, is the way in which Western militaries and other civilian actors seemed to be willing to engage with such complexity as if they believed that they could control it. On the Frontier, political officers meddled deeply in fluid tribal dynamics. In Algeria the French army mobilised psychological warfare on a vast scale while the SAS sought to radically transform the relationship between rulers and governed. In Vietnam it was clear that many within the US army and MACV truly believed in the ability of pacification to withstand the challenge of revolutionary warfare being waged simultaneously across the dimensions of military, political, psychological, social and economic action, while in Iraq and Afghanistan Western military actors, now bolstered by the input of social science academics, dived deep into tribal and local politics as a method of defeating insurgencies. This observation is not necessarily meant to condemn military ambitions. To reiterate the point made at the outset of this book, military officers are often sophisticated intellectual actors whose operational lives present them with the most difficult challenges. The tasks with which they are presented in conflicts like these are blindingly difficult and leave them with little option but to engage in such actions. It should come as no surprise that failure happens when it does. But the often-selective nature of their intellectual engagement can be instructive. Returning to the earlier example of the British army's

52nd Brigade's undertaking of the battle for Musa Qala in Helmand in 2007, it is clear that prior to their deployment the brigade's command team engaged in the concerted study of complex psychological theories of decision-making and human behaviours more generally. The field of behavioural economics was drawn upon in an effort to provide that fighting formation with a more effective way of influencing local actions than simply inflicting violence or doling out money. Throughout their deployment the brigade worked hard on the 'political' aspect of population-centric COIN. Subsequently the commander, under the imprimatur of General Stanley McChrystal, would publish a book advocating this sort of conceptual 'outreach' as a key aspect of future operations of this sort. In some respects this intellectual effort was admirable. But it was also revealing. These academic theories are immensely difficult to understand, let alone employ in instrumental terms when adopted on the back of only a few hours of study by military actors seeking to radically adjust the behaviours of an unfamiliar society within a six-month time frame and accompanied by a generous dose of violence. But even that is less important than the most salient fact of all: that at no point in the process did 52 Brigade's command team challenge the intellectual and epistemological foundations of their own doctrine. They never sought to question the basic assumptions underpinning population-centric COIN, and of the insurgency narrative in general. It was literally taken as read that the insurgency/development narrative and the clear-hold-build process underpinning it was beyond the requirement for serious analysis. Was this because the doctrine was beyond intellectual reproach? Or, as others suggest, because FM 3-24 satisfied the requirement to intellectualise COIN in accordance with the perceived complexity of the new operating environments in Iraq and Afghanistan, while simultaneously affording military actors the leeway to operate in a fashion that best suited their organisational cultures and self-identities? Are we then presented with the reality of political warfare simply as a method of using engagement with local politics to disguise an inherent preference for largely conventional warfare? Even if we are, can militaries be blamed for this? Not really. Readily placing them in precarious, fragile and often time-limited situations where military superiority often counts for little and which demand the successful application of a wide range of *non*-military forms of expertise and behaviour would seem to be a problem not of the militaries' making. Neither can militaries be blamed for trying to simplify the world around them, to see straight lines where none exist. The notion that they should be tasked with the employment of lethal violence without a reassuring logic as to its utility in delivering positive outcomes is an understandably unpalatable

prospect. By removing those straight lines, one is potentially asking military actors to feel comfortable with the notion of inflicting lethal force without any real understanding of the ultimate relationship between actions and outcomes, a state of affairs that has huge implications for the utility of military power.

At heart, therefore, the debate is not really about the utility of cultural understanding, which was always a highly tactical argument anyway. In certain circumstances its advocates could no doubt prove its benefit in aiding COIN and stabilisation operations. But any such argument that claims the benefits of knowing the human terrain, of unpicking tribal hierarchies, of creating forms of local engagement, of influencing 'key leaders' and generally understanding and shaping local social and political forces ignores a far more important set of questions about the strategic utility of population-centric COIN, its methods of delivering peace and stability, its morality and its track record. It reflects minimally upon the hyper-ambition of military interventions driven by strategic objectives far removed from the realities of the ground, and the extent to which we believe that the outcomes we desire from these are achievable at the hands of military actors constituted to favour entirely different types of warfare. What this book has shown is that if we assess the utility of cultural understanding in COIN and stabilisation against the historical record, the picture remains a murky one. The tendency for military actors in particular to prioritise political warfare as a predominantly military activity where the oft-expressed desire for influence realistically means a desire for power and control; the fact that the dynamics with which they engage as part of that process are often simply too difficult to control even if they can be understood; the fact that the strategic objectives at hand are often invisible, ever-changing or simply unfeasible – all of these things mean that the seemingly positive effects of specific initiatives like the HTS as well as broader population-centric COIN methods designed to build influence and legitimacy are often extremely short-lived. Time and again throughout this study military actors and their civilian counterparts engaging in their chosen forms of political warfare implemented a range of actions that without doubt achieved immediate, positive effect. Levels of insurgent violence dropped, civil society flourished, economic activity rose, and some sense of normalcy returned to a previously desperate situation. On occasion, peace appeared to flower. In each instance, however, the changes wrought were fragile. The measures applied could never permanently counteract the dynamics ranged against them, be they inherent to the society in question or simply arising as a natural consequence of the forced imposition of change by external actors operating with their own narrow interests in mind.

Lastly, and despite this book having dealt almost exclusively with what might be considered ‘old-fashioned’ political warfare, the arguments advanced hold a degree of relevance going forward. This is not simply because, as the current French experience in Mali indicates, these sorts of operations are likely to repeat themselves *ad infinitum*.¹² They are also relevant because the paradigm used in this book, i.e. COIN or stabilisation operations as forms of armed politics, illustrated the discomfort that professional Western militaries exhibited when confronted by this unsettling construct. As Jackson explained, ‘[E]ffective adaptation in counter-insurgency requires militaries to overthrow or at least suspend the most basic causal beliefs and frames of their profession.’¹³ In other words, they had to abandon the simple causal beliefs and measures of effectiveness of their favoured paradigm of battle in favour of the uncertainty and ambiguity of politics. In the realm of COIN, the requirements demanded by this sort of innovation appeared incompatible with deeply held beliefs and preferences of the profession as a whole. But why should this matter to those charged with thinking about the contemporary and future battlefield?

It matters because recent trends in modern conflict indicate a heavy shift in focus to forms of action that conceive of military power and military action not only in directly kinetic forms in support of political objectives, but as actively political in nature themselves.¹⁴ In other words, a form of political warfare, albeit realigned to Kennan’s Cold War concept. The ‘Grey Zone’, Russia’s ‘New Generation’ warfare and *Gibridnaya Voyna* – its particular home-grown variant of ‘Hybrid War’ – signal the (re-)emergence of a powerful form of interstate conflict which confronts the West with a thoroughly ambiguous mix of non-violent and violent forms of state power.¹⁵ As Mark Galleoti notes, the Russian vision of this understands military action to be nested fully within a broad range of precursor ‘political’ actions designed firstly to weaken the opponent from within; to use subversion, information and agitation to morally and psychologically rupture the target society prior to the advent of open hostilities, if these are even required. As he states, ‘From the tsars through the Bolsheviks, the Russians have long been accustomed to a style of warfare that refuses to acknowledge any hard and fast distinctions between overt and covert, kinetic and political.’¹⁶ The Kremlin’s incumbents then as today saw wholly non-military yet essentially assertive and subversive approaches as interchangeable with directly military ones, and their military was expected to adapt fluidly to these changing needs and priorities.¹⁷

What should this mean for Western militaries, or perhaps the broader NATO alliance? Regardless of his own warnings, Galleoti makes the

point that it certainly does not absolve the West of the need to retain the ability to conduct major conventional operations. That form of war is still absolutely fundamental to Russian designs and therefore should be fundamental as part of any deterrent. But such a focus should not blind Western military professionals from better understanding the way in which peer or near-peer opponents conceive the symbiotic relationship between military power and direct political outcomes, or the role that Western military power might seek to play in response to a 'sub-threshold' campaign of subversion and agitation. In other words, modern Western militaries need to balance their understandable preoccupation with military operations with a thorough understanding of modern deterrence theory in the context of a new paradigm, one where the opponent's active use of military power sits in a thoroughly confusing space between hard diplomacy and outright war, intermingled with myriad other lines of activity both visible and invisible. They should not ditch their Clausewitz, but they should start paying heed to thinkers such as Evgeny Messner, the original proponent of 'subversion-war' whose ideas currently underpin the techniques of *Gibridnaya Voyna*, and Sergei Chakhotin, who during the same period (1930s) wrote extensively on the subject of authoritarian regimes' weaponisation of political propaganda. Theorists such as these may broaden the concept of war beyond its seemingly natural confines, but digestion of their ideas encourages the ability to better understand an opponent that thrives on a tradition of propaganda, misinformation and political agitation and who, in the words of Jānis Bērziņš, 'conceives of the battlespace as lying primarily in the mind'.¹⁸

But such shifts aren't easy. The winning of the kinetic battle at the tactical and operational level remains a strong preoccupation for Western militaries, as evinced by the development of new concepts such as Multi Domain Operations.¹⁹ Deterrence theory in all its complexity remains an under-studied phenomenon at military staff colleges. 'Information Operations' are a central component of modern doctrine and are spoken of regularly, but it remains unclear whether the United States, Britain and others are genuinely geared-up for a cognitive leap into the realm of modern political warfare.²⁰ Some would contest such a suggestion, pointing toward the latter's attempts to generate a relevant conceptual approach by way of the aforementioned doctrine of Integrated Action and the recent introduction of formations responsible for the British army's 'Influence and Outreach', a capability now judged essential to prevail in conflicts fought in the social, informational and psychological realms.²¹ But even if doctrine provides the intellectual answer to the challenges of the modern battlespace and even if small pockets of genuine expertise exist among niche units such as the 500-strong 77 Brigade

and Special Operations Forces, it does not necessarily reflect the core competencies, preferences and skills of the military organisation as a whole, particularly when compared to those such as the Russians, Chinese and Iranians whose militaries have long been encultured to think 'politically' and who exist as part of a historical tradition that purposely blurs the division between political action and those expected to accomplish the military dimension of the government's plans.²²

These rival perspectives are important. This book has illustrated some of the problems that occurred when Western militaries attempted forms of political warfare in the context of large-scale COIN/stabilisation operations. But be it in the form of COIN, stabilisation or an attempt to counter the subversive activities of a peer or near-enemy, Western military professionals need to better understand their role in forms of conflict and confrontation where they (and their opponents) adopt the mantle of political actors. A state of affairs whereby, as a class of professional warriors, they will be thrown into forms of conflict or confrontation that prioritise unfamiliar and culturally challenging behaviours, and which shift them out of their professional and psychological comfort zone into unfamiliar and potentially uncomfortable realms of thought.²³

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Notes

Preface

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1 Culture Warriors

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 - 13 See Porter's rebuttal of critiques of his argument in 'Afterword', in Tarak Barkawi and Keith Stanski (eds) *Orientalism and War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 263–74. For another example of this more questioning approach see Synne L. Dyvik *Gendering Counterinsurgency: Performativity, Embodiment and Experience in the Afghan Theatre of War* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 61–5.
 - 14 Slavoz Žizek used the term 'unknown knowns' in reference to the now infamous statement by US Secretary for Defense Donald Rumsfeld in February 2002 that '[A]s we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.' Žizek argued that the more important consideration was the 'unknown knowns,' namely those silent presuppositions that we are not aware of but which guide our actions. See abstract to 'Philosophy, "Unknown Knowns" and the Public Use of Reason', *Topoi*, 25:3 (2006), 137–42. For an in-depth critique of some of the 'unknown knowns' of COIN doctrine see Claire Duncanson and Hilary Cornish, 'A Feminist Approach to British Counterinsurgency', in Paul Dixon (ed.) *The British Approach to Counterinsurgency: From Malaya and Northern Ireland to Iraq and Afghanistan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 147–73.
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- 23 Montgomery McFate, 'Mind the Gap: Bridging the Military Academic Divide', in *ibid.*, 45–88.
- 24 Janice H. Laurence, 'Some Lessons Learned and the Way Forward', in *ibid.*, 307.
- 25 It should be noted that certain of those involved with the HTS resisted the notion of it being framed as any form of anthropology. See in particular Ryan Evans, 'The Seven Deadly Sins of the Human Terrain System: An Insider Perspective', *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (13 July 2015), www.fpri.org/2015/07/the-seven-deadly-sins-of-the-human-terrain-system-an-insiders-perspective/. Evans provides an articulate defence of the HTS in principle but identifies as a critical weakness the willingness to have it described as an anthropological endeavour, something that guaranteed hostility from the academic world in particular. See also David B. Edwards, 'Counterinsurgency as a Cultural System', *Small Wars Journal* (December 2010), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/630-edwards.pdf>.
- 26 David H. Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology* (Petrolia: Counterpunch, 2011), 106.
- 27 Johnson and Zelen (eds.) *Culture, Conflict and Counterinsurgency*, 242.
- 28 Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology*, 106.
- 29 For more on the propensity for humans to subscribe to an 'illusion of control', see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (London and New York: Penguin, 2013), 203–6.
- 30 Christopher J. Lamb, James Douglas Orton, Michael C. Davies and Theodore Pikulsky, *Human Terrain Teams: An Organisational Innovation for Sociocultural Knowledge in Irregular Warfare* (Washington, DC: Institute of World Politics, 2013), 180.
- 31 McFate and Laurence, *Social Science Goes to War*, 25.
- 32 Essentially, how does one prove that the work of an HTT is any more useful or insightful than that of a perceptive soldier? For example, McFate uses the example of an HTT that advised an unnamed US brigade commander to establish relations with a particular tribal sheikh during the 2008 Sunni awakening in Iraq, leading to the handing-over of a vast weapons cache to the Americans. This does not prove, however, that the HTT provided greater insight than ordinary brigade intelligence assets, nor does it seek to account for the decision-making of the Iraqi parties in question. See *Social Science Goes to War*, 27.
- 33 In a precursor article, for example, McFate had observed that British forces in Basra, Iraq, had quickly recognised the primacy of tribal politics in their area

- of operations (AO) and successfully incorporated this into their military planning. Yet subsequent events in 2007–9 revealed that British understanding of tribal politics in Basra, and southern Iraq more generally, was almost entirely illusory, and their failures in this respect would contribute to their embarrassing withdrawal from the city in 2010. See ‘The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture’, *Joint Force Quarterly*, 38:3 (2005), 42–8.
- 34 https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_24.pdf. For analysis of FM 3–24’s focus upon the cultural dimension of counterinsurgency, see Heuser, ‘The Cultural Revolution in Counterinsurgency’, 165–70.
- 35 See David H. Petraeus and James F. Amos, *Field Manual 3–24 Counterinsurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). The foreword to the original manual states that ‘conducting a successful counterinsurgency campaign requires a flexible, adaptive force led by agile, well-informed, culturally astute leaders’. The 2018 version advocates ‘[a]n adaptive and flexible mindset to understand the population, anticipate insurgent actions, be comfortable among the population’. See FM 3–24 (2018), xiii.
- 36 McFate, *In the Margins of Empire*, 9. McFate notes that the intention, while admirable, was largely unworkable due to a lack of both expertise and interest on the part of instructors.
- 37 Martin Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 286. See also Michael T. Flynn, Matt Pottinger and Paul Batchelor, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2010), 7.
- 38 <https://info.publicintelligence.net/JCOA-Decade-of-War.pdf>, 4.
- 39 See Australian Army Land Warfare Doctrine (LWD) 3–01 *Counterinsurgency*, 56.
- 40 Current French doctrine pertaining to irregular warfare states that ‘[T]echnological instruments essentially allow us to know rather than to understand. Hence human research has to have specialists who not only have a solid military training but also have an extensive knowledge of the theatre, the societies and cultures, the opposing groups, that is about everything which enables us to understand, to “get a feel”.’ See FT-01 (Eng) *Winning the Battle, Building the Peace: Land Forces in Present and Future Conflicts*, 67.
- 41 See UK Ministry of Defence, Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 04 *Understanding and Decision-Making* (2nd ed., 2016).
- 42 Integrated Action is described as an activity that ‘blends lethal and non-lethal actions to have effects on the understanding, physical capability, will and cohesion of the audience. Organised into attainable objectives, these effects are ultimately realised in people’s minds, influencing their decision making, to achieve the desired outcomes. Although not all tactical activities are directed against people, the ultimate targets of land power are the audience and actors (including enemies, adversaries, allies and civilians).’ See UK Ministry of Defence, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) *Land Operations* (2017), 4–06.
- 43 https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/jp3_24.pdf, IV, ‘Understanding the Operating Environment’, 18.

- 44 See Jacqueline L. Hazelton, 'The "Hearts and Minds" Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare', *International Security*, 42:1 (2017), 80–113.
- 45 Anthony Kaduck, 'The unbearable lightness of culture: anthropology, non-linearity and the Human Terrain System', MA dissertation, King's College London (2010), 52.
- 46 Ben Anderson, *No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic War for Afghanistan* (Banbury: Oneworld, 2011), 14.
- 47 Eli Berman, Joseph Felter and Jacob Shapiro, with Vesta Mackintyre, *Small Wars, Big Data: The Information Revolution in Modern Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). See also Roberto González, 'Seeing into Hearts and Minds Part 2: Big Data, Algorithms and Computational Counterinsurgency', *Anthropology Today*, 31:4 (2015), 13–18.
- 48 See Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman and Jacob N. Shapiro, 'Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?' *International Security*, 37:1 (2012), 7–40.
- 49 Long argued, '[I]magine an area in which violence observed by or reported to US forces is zero. This could mean that US forces have successfully driven insurgents out of the area or it could mean that insurgents have established such comprehensive control over an area that violent action is either not necessary or never reported to US forces.' He noted other subtleties potentially uncaptured by data. A decrease in the number of violent events, for example, which SIGACTs would capture, could be compensated for by an increase in their intensity, which might not. Yet the political consequences of fewer but more violent events could be hugely significant. See H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review 21 on 'Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?' (April 2013), 4, <https://issforum.org/articlereviews/21-testing-the-surge>.
- 50 Anna Simon, 'Anthropology, Culture and COIN in a Hybrid Warfare World', in Paul Brister, William Natter and Robert Tomes (eds.) *Hybrid Warfare and Transnational Threats: Perspectives for an Era of Persistent Conflict* (New York: Council for Emerging National Security Studies, 2011), 83–92, at 90.
- 51 Ibid., 44.
- 52 See McFate, *Social Science Goes to War*, 41, and Christopher Sims, *The Human Terrain System: Operationally Relevant Social Science Research in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Carlisle, PA: US Strategic Studies Institute, 2016), 387.
- 53 Dan Caldwell (ed.) *Alexander George: A Pioneer in Political and Social Sciences* (New York: Springer, 2018), 14.
- 54 See Ben Taub, 'The spy who came home: why an expert in counterterrorism became a beat cop', *New Yorker*, 30 April 2018. The subject of the article, former CIA field officer Patrick Skinner, savagely decried the ignorance of senior policymakers in relation to interventions in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.
- 55 The noted Arabist scholar Sir Charles Tripp, summoned in early 2003 to discuss the forthcoming invasion of Iraq with Tony Blair, found the latter to be uninterested in detail and simply searching for confirmation of Saddam Hussein's 'unique' evil. 'There was little interest in the hideous

- complications – such as religious nationalists and Islamists who might not take kindly to foreign occupation – that might follow.’ See *The Guardian*, 27 September 2007, ‘You got rid of one Saddam and you left us with 50’.
- 56 In relation to the decision to go to war in Iraq, see Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 201–3.
- 57 Aaron Rapport, *Waging War, Planning Peace: US Non-combat Operations and Major Wars* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015), 29.
- 58 Dominic P. Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 59 Kenneth Payne, *The Psychology of Strategy: Exploring Rationality in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 60 Aaron Rapport, ‘The Long and Short of It: Cognitive Constraints on Leaders’ Assessments of Postwar Iraq’, *International Security*, 37:3 (2012/13), 133–71.
- 61 George F. Kennan, ‘The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare, 30 April 1948. See <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114320.pdf?v=944c40c2ed95dc52d2d6966ce7666f90>. At the time, Kennan was head of the US State Department’s policy-planning staff.
- 62 For two excellent illustrations of the span of activities encompassed by the notion of political warfare, see Rory Cormac, *Disrupt and Deny: Spies, Special Forces and the Secret Pursuit of British Foreign Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War: Moving beyond the Hybrid* (London: Routledge, 2019). It should be noted that the Russian theory of political war is far more likely to encompass forms of military power as part of the process, a form of ‘heavy metal diplomacy’. See Galeotti, *Russian Political War*, 72.
- 63 Dierk Walter, *Colonial Violence: European Empires and the Use of Force* (London: Hurst and Co., 2017), 105–9; Colin F. Jackson, ‘Defeat in victory: organizational defeat in counterinsurgency’, unpublished PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2008), 112–15; and Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty First Century Politics As Combat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–15.
- 64 Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 109.
- 65 Pacification and stabilisation are elastic concepts. The former in particular is a broad term, generally used by soldiers and historians in reference to the era of colonial warfare, and possessing generally negative connotations. For the purpose of this study, pacification describes a process by which an intervening power seeks the establishment of internal security, political stability and economic viability in a particular region or area through a variety of civil–military measures. Stabilisation is a more specific doctrinally defined activity. NATO joint doctrine, for example, defines it as ‘an approach used to mitigate crisis and promote legitimate political authority, using comprehensive civilian and military actions used to reduce violence, re-establish security, end social, economic and political turmoil, and set the conditions for longer term stability’. See Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 3 4.5 *Allied Joint Doctrine for Military Support to Stabilisation and Reconstruction*, www.gov.uk/government/publications/allied-joint-doctrine-for-the-military-contribution-to-stabilization-and-reconstruction-ajp-345a. In both NATO and British doctrine, stabilisation

acts as the strategic context for COIN operations, whereas in US doctrine the opposite is the case.

- 66 Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 8.
- 67 Ibid., 10.
- 68 Gonzalez, 'Beyond the Human Terrain System', 10–12.
- 69 See https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN8330_AD2018-02_web_final.pdf, Army Directive (Global Cultural Knowledge Network), April 2018, 2.
- 70 Simon, 'Anthropology, Culture and COIN', 91.
- 71 It is worth elaborating upon the distinction between complicated and complex if one applies the concepts to the social realm. Complicated implies many elements or moving parts, but which are generally unreactive in themselves or when exposed to internal or external stimuli. Complex, on the other hand, implies a system that is not only complicated, but which reacts and adapts, often unpredictably, to internal or external stimuli. For an example of 'complexity in application' to the urban environment, for example, see David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 72 Dr Nicholas Krohley, 'Human Analysis in the Age of Algorithm', *Modern War Institute* (Podcast, 11 October 2017), <https://mwi.usma.edu/mwi-podcast-human-analysis-age-algorithm-dr-nicholas-krohley/>.
- 73 These points are acknowledged by Berman et al. See *Big Data, Small Wars*, 308. David H. Price states that cultural intelligence is suited to the reduction of frictions, or simply acknowledgement of local customs or beliefs, but that such intelligence is no basis for social engineering and the actual defeat of insurgents. See *Weaponizing Anthropology*, 181.
- 74 Interview with General (Ret.) Stanley McChrystal, 'Special Operations in a Chaotic World', *Prism* (Journal for the Center for Complex Operations), 6:3 (2016), 178–88, at 178.
- 75 The 2019 US army official report of the Iraq War makes very little substantive mention of the HTS in its 1,300-odd pages. See Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vols. 1: *Invasion, Insurgency and Civil War 2003–2006* and 2: *Surge and Withdrawal 2007–2011* (January 2019), <http://publications.armywarcollege.edu/>.
- 76 See Helen Altman Klein and Gilbert Kuperman, 'Through an Arab Cultural Lens', *Military Review*, 88:3 (2008), 100–5.
- 77 Josef Teboho Ansorge and Tarak Barkawi, 'Utile Forms: Power and Knowledge in Small War', *Review of International Studies*, 40:1 (2014), 3–24.
- 78 John Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53–111.
- 79 Ibid., 55. As Gaddis phrases it, 'the "ecological" method considers how components interact to become systems, whose nature can't be defined merely by calculating the sum of their parts'.

2 Themes and Issues

- 1 Not to be confused with the British army's Special Air Service.
- 2 Douglas Porch, *Wars of Empire* (London: Cassell, 2000), 4.

- 3 Yuen Foon Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8–11. The author discusses the propensity for the negative use of historical analogy in policymaking.
- 4 As Samantha Power, former US ambassador to the United Nations, stated in March 2017, '[H]istory is simply not present enough in senior policymaking discussions. There is just not enough knowledge of history in the room.' See 'Destined for War? Can the US and China Escape the Thucydides trap?', lecture to Harvard University Kennedy School of Politics, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yghOc-lMIM>. Her analysis as to why this was the case was supported by Niall Fergusson, who suggests that historians have largely ceded the public arena to lawyers, political scientists and economists. See 'The Decline and Fall of History' (November 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WXNF6Vy07A>.
- 5 It can be argued that the imperial analogy was resisted because it served to challenge the 'operational code' of those in power. Alexander George advanced the concept of an operational code as a way of understanding political decision-making at the highest levels, specifically the way in which policymakers and political leaders understood both the nature of the world around them and the role of politics within. See Alexander George, 'The Operational Code: A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Their Decisionmaking', *International Studies Quarterly*, 13(1969), 190–222.
- 6 Duncan Bell, 'Ideologies of Empire' in Michael Freenden and Marc Stears (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 536–62.
- 7 Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 3.
- 8 For more on this see Mathew Connolly, 'The New Imperialists' in Craig Calhoun, Frederick Cooper and Kevin W. Moore (eds.) *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Power* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 19–34.
- 9 Ideology can be defined as 'clusters of ideas, beliefs, opinions, values and attitudes usually held by identifiable groups, that provide directives, even plans, of action for public policy-making in an endeavour to uphold, justify, change or criticize the social and political arrangements of a state or other political community'. See Michael Freeden, 'Ideology, Political Theory and Political Philosophy' in Gerald F. Gaus and Chandran Kukathas (eds.) *The Handbook of Political Theory* (London: SAGE, 2004), 6.
- 10 Patrick Porter, *Blunder: Britain's War in Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 17.
- 11 See Frank Ninkovich, 'The New Empire' in Kimberly Kagan (ed.) *The Imperial Moment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 142. Patrick Porter also emphasises the degree to which the British decision to go to war in Iraq was prompted by deeply held core convictions, rather than at the behest of powerful commercial interests. See *Blunder*, 17–18.

- 12 Victor Kiernan, 'Europe in the World: The Imperial Record' in Victor Kiernan and Hervey J. Kaye (eds.) *Imperialism and Its Contradictions* (London: Routledge, 1995), 101.
- 13 Brett Bowden, *Empires of Civilization: The Evolution of an Imperial Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 70–1.
- 14 Bell's alternative explanations for imperial expansion, namely the commercial-exploitative, republican and martialist motivations for imperial expansion, still matter. The first is self-explanatory, the second sees imperialism as a method by which to ensure individual and collective virtue while upholding national character and glory, while the latter holds that conquest actually defines a nation and its character. See 'Ideologies of Empire', 544–7.
- 15 Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 16 Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination*, 6–33.
- 17 Antoinette Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 19 Even outside of the major outbreaks of violence there was a near-continual state of military activity. In India there were seventy-seven armed rebellions over the course of the Raj. In Kenya between 1893 and 1911 there were thirty separate military operations undertaken in an effort to pacify the country. In Nigeria it took nineteen armed campaigns between 1900 and 1906 to do the same, while troops in German East Africa conducted 231 military expeditions between 1889 and 1910 as part of their own pacification policy. See Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 65–6.
- 20 Burton, *The Trouble with Empire*, 22.
- 21 Alice Conklin quoted in Anders Aslund, *Challenges of Globalization: Imbalances and Growth* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute, 2008), 211.
- 22 Peter Arnett 'Major Describes Move', *New York Times*, 8 February 1968, 14. The article began, 'BENTRE, Feb. 7 (AP) – "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it," a United States major said today.' The accuracy of the quote is debated, but the sentiment is well understood as a metaphor for the contradictions inherent to COIN and nation-building.
- 23 For more on this in the postcolonial era see Martin Thomas, *Fight or Flight: Britain, France, and Their Roads from Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 92–107.
- 24 As Frederick Cooper states, the fact that imperial governments and settlers might act in a brutal or exploitative fashion did not prevent highly public scandals over slavery, massacres, poverty and colonial wars being a periodic feature of imperial governance. See Cooper, 'Modernizing Colonialism and the Limits of Empire' in *Lessons of Empire*, 66.
- 25 Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 107.
- 26 For more on the nature of French imperialism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Alice Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895–1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The*

- Rise of Liberal Imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
- 27 Samuel P. Huntington, 'Political Stability and Security in South Vietnam' (Policy Planning Council, US Department of State, 1967), 1–10.
- 28 Jennifer Pitts, 'Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism' in Sankkar Mathu (ed.) *Empire and Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 351–88, at 363.
- 29 Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 60.
- 30 See Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron–Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), *passim*, and Berman et al., *Small Wars, Big Data*, 310.
- 31 For more on the theorising of interdependent variables see Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 71–90.
- 32 For more on the Clausewitzian 'ideal' vs 'reality', see Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66–8.
- 33 Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), xii.
- 34 Richard K. Betts, 'Is Strategy an Illusion?' *International Security*, 25:2 (2000), 5–50.
- 35 Antulio Echavarria II, *Preparing for One War and Getting Another?* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2010), 6.
- 36 Austin Long, *The Soul of Armies: Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Military Culture in the US and UK* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).
- 37 What Josef Ansorge and Tarak Barkawi refer to as doctrine's 'world ordering' and 'world-making' properties. See 'Utile Forms', 3.
- 38 Sir John Hackett, *The Profession of Arms* (London: The Times Publishing, 1963), 3.
- 39 Wendy Brown, 'Review Symposium: The New US Army/US Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual As Political Theory and Political Praxis', *Perspectives on Politics* 6:2 (2008), 354–7, at 354.
- 40 www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150217QBritishArmy.pdf, 4.
- 41 Paul K. Davis, *Dilemmas of Intervention: Social Science for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2011), Summary xvii. See also Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, 64.
- 42 This is broadly representative of what some have described as the military's preference for the notion of 'physicalism', i.e. the breaking down of a system into a subset of actors or subsystems, thus revealing the connections between them. Through this 'physical lens', causes are seen as literally connected to their effects. See Andrew J. Hill and Stephen J. Gerras, 'Stuff Happens: Understanding Causation in Policy and Strategy', *Parameters*, 48:2 (2018), 13–27.
- 43 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/516849/20160302-Stable_world_JDP_05.pdf, 18.
- 44 Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty First Century Politics As Combat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 144.

- 45 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/516849/20160302-Stable_world_JDP_05.pdf, 13. For the relationship between stabilisation and COIN in US doctrine see FM 3-24, xvi.
- 46 Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1964; reprinted Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)
- 47 Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 176–97.
- 48 Roberto J. González and David H. Price, ‘When Anthropologists Become Counter-Insurgents’, *Counterpunch* (28 September 2007), www.counterpunch.org/2007/09/28/when-anthropologists-become-counter-insurgents/.
- 49 Porter, *Military Orientalism*, *passim*.
- 50 Stathis Kalyvas, Stephen Biddle et al. in Brown, ‘Review Symposium’, 347–60.
- 51 Hazelton, ‘The “Hearts and Minds” Fallacy’, 80–113.
- 52 Anderson, *No Worse Enemy*, 13.
- 53 Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 153.
- 54 It should be acknowledged that Israeli doctrine in 2006 during the Second Lebanon War was not de facto based upon the theory of Systemic Operational Design, but it was close enough in spirit to render tactical and operational orders, as seen by the author in discussion with Israeli officers, incomprehensible.
- 55 Consider too that the various facets of modern conflict theoretically require multiple doctrines, consisting of thousands of pages, to be read, considered and digested, something which in practice does not happen. As an example, the authors of the first edition of the British JDP 0-4 (Understanding) recommended that it be consulted in conjunction with JDP 2-00 (Understanding and Intelligence in Support of Joint Operations), NATO’s AJP-2 (Joint Intelligence, Counter Intelligence and Security Doctrine), JDPs 01-00 (Campaigning), 3-00 (Campaign Execution) and 5-00 (Campaign Planning), JDP 6-00 (Communications and Information Systems Support to Joint Operations) and JDP 3-40 (Security and Stabilisation: the Military Contribution). Presumably AFM (Army Field Manual) Vol. 1 Part 10 (Counter Insurgency) should be consulted too. In all, a total of some 1,800 pages of doctrine.
- 56 Robert Jervis, ‘System Effects Revisited’, *Critical Review*, 24:3 (2012), 393–415, at 394.
- 57 Damon Coletta, ‘Principal-Agent Theory in Complex Operations’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 24:2 (2013), 306–21.
- 58 Alexander George, *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), 45.
- 59 Nathan Leites’s 1950s research into the notion of an operational code in Bolshevik politics proposed a firm set of beliefs about rules of action that shape an actor’s perception and diagnosis of certain situations. See Leites, *The Operational Code of the Politburo* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2007).

- 60 Jackson, 'Defeat in Victory', 13–57. Of course, such arguments may be disputed by military commanders and Jackson fully acknowledges that there will be numerous non-adherents to this approach in any professional military organisation. But these will be outliers – a small number of individuals distributed within a much larger pool.
- 61 As Austin Long illustrates in detail, and as others such as Douglas Porch, Andrew Bacevich and Anthony King have noted, no matter the tendency of doctrine manuals to advocate highly sophisticated political responses to the challenges posed, military organisational culture and the inherent preferences that flow from it cause such ideas to be largely ignored. Despite their chanting the enlightened mantras of COIN or stabilisation theory, Western militaries have often tended in practice, and wherever possible, to pursue a single-minded adherence to forms of kinetic action and violent compellence. See Long, *The Soul of Armies*, 136–9; and Anthony King, 'Understanding the Helmand Campaign: British Military Operations in Helmand', *International Affairs*, 86:2 (2010), 322–30. For more on the distance between theory and practice in COIN doctrine see Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 300–3; and Andrew Bacevich, *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), 191–8.
- 62 Brown, 'Review Symposium', 355.

3 Knowledge, Influence and Control: From the Imperial Era to the Modern Day

- 1 Alexander de Toqueville, quoted by Abdelmajid Hannoum in 'Colonialism and Knowledge in Algeria: The Archives of the Arab Bureau', *History and Anthropology*, 12:4 (2001), 343–79, at 344.
- 2 Dierk Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 238.
- 3 US army officer, cited in Bacevich, *Washington Rules*, 218.
- 4 The annotation reads, 'A British Major General who fought in Afghanistan and the Boer War provides lessons learned that remain applicable today'. FM 3-24, 391. Some scholars support the assertion that Callwell is a useful reference point. See V. Nolan, *Military Leadership and Counterinsurgency: The British Army and Small War Strategy since World War II* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 43; and David Betz, 'Counterinsurgency, Victorian Style', *Survival*, 54:4 (2012), 161–82. Daniel Whittingham offers some defence of Callwell's otherwise one-dimensional focus, making the point that Callwell did exhort colonial soldiers to 'understand' the enemy. But that understanding appears limited to dividing opponents into seven categories including 'irregulars', 'savages', 'fanatics', 'Armies of Savages in the Bush', 'mounted forces' and, oddly, 'Boers', who appeared to merit their own category. See Whittingham, 'Savage Warfare: C.E. Callwell, the Roots of Counter-insurgency, and the Nineteenth Century Context', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 23:4–5 (2012), 591–607, at 596.
- 5 Ethnography focuses on single cultures or specific structures within one culture. Ethnology is a study of the members and structures of cultures and of the relationship of members to their cultures.

- 6 'Political technology' means the mastery and utilisation of the art of politics for directing political operations and manipulating political methods. It implies systematic application of knowledge to practical tasks. For more on the concept of political technology in application to colonial conquest and its marriage with anthropology, see Benoît L'Estoile, Federico Neiburg and Lygia Maria Sigaud, *Empires, Nations, and Natives: Anthropology and State-Making* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 40.
- 7 McFate, *Military Anthropology*, *passim*.
- 8 Adherents to the policy of assimilation saw it as the method by which republicanism could square away its moral concerns over colonial conquest. Assimilationists believed that France could mould any culture into that of its own image; precolonial political, social and hereditary elites would be disbanded in favour of a new, francophone civilisation. The largely metropolitan assimilationists, however, found themselves opposed by the activist associationists, notably the military commanders operating in what was to become French Indochina, who believed assimilation to be naive in its assumption that all civilisations could follow or adhere to the French model, impracticable in reality and ignorant of the benefits of utilising those pre-existing political and social elites. See Moshe Gershovich, *French Military Rule in Morocco* (London/Portland, OR: Frank Cass 2000); also Michael D. Lewis, 'One Hundred Million Frenchmen: The Assimilation Theory in French Colonial Policy', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4:2 (1962), 129–53. For an excellent survey of interpretations of French colonial policy, see R. Aldrich, 'Imperial *Mise en Valeur* and *Mise en Segne*: Recent Works on French Colonialism', *Historical Journal* 45:4 (2002), 917–36.
- 9 Hannoum, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Algeria*, 345.
- 10 Thomas Rid, 'Razzia: A Turning Point in Modern Strategy', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 21:4 (2009), 617–35, at 627.
- 11 Hannoum, *Colonialism and Knowledge in Algeria*, 346.
- 12 The imperial experience was highly compartmentalised. As Leopold Amery, Britain's colonial secretary from 1924 to 1929, noted, his office dealt with some thirty-six different governments. Each had grown on the spot by a continuous process of local evolution. Each, therefore, 'was adapted to local conditions, instinctive in its understanding of those conditions and in its sympathy with the population it administers'. See Anton Bertram, *The Colonial Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3. Amery's point was that there was no such thing as a single colonial 'system', in terms of functions, methods and philosophies that could be recognised across the British Empire, something that applied in large part to the French Empire too.
- 13 James Hevia, *The Imperial Security State: British Imperial Knowledge and Empire Building* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 53–73.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 152–93. Such forms of knowledge allowed officers to calculate whether Indian Army operations could be sustained in that territory and, presumably, how easily the tribe might be economically dislocated if need be.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 66.
- 16 George M. Foster, *Applied Anthropology* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1969), 198.

- 17 As Powell himself stated, 'In pursuing these ethnographic investigations it has been the endeavor ... to produce results of practical value in the administration of Indian affairs ... and the causes and remedies for the inevitable conflict that arises from the spread of civilisation over a region previously inhabited by savages.' See *Anthropology of the Numa: John Wesley Powell's Manuscripts on the Numic People of Western North America 1868–80*, Smithsonian Libraries, <https://repository.si.edu/handle/10088/1329?show=full>.
- 18 Foster, *Applied Anthropology*, 185.
- 19 Quoted in George Lucas, *Anthropologists in Arms: The Ethics of Military Anthropology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman, 2009), 31.
- 20 Ranger, 'From Humanism to the Science of Man', 68.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 64.
- 22 The Morant Bay rebellion was a short-lived uprising on the British colonial territory of Jamaica that resulted in the killing of some 400 black Jamaican men, women and children by British troops. See Rande W. Kostal, *A Jurisprudence of Power: Victorian Empire and the Rule of Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- 23 For more on the Igbo uprising in the face of British anthropological 'control' see Roberto Gonzalez, *American Counter-insurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2009), 111–14.
- 24 Terence Ranger and Duncan Bell point to the tendency for native society to seize the ideas of the imperial powers and turn these against them. Ranger gives the example of Jomo Kenyatta, who trained as an anthropologist. Where whites wanted to use education to make Africans good servants, Africans seized upon education as a weapon of political and national liberation. See Ranger, 'From Humanism to the Science of Man', 125. Bell references the spread of Marxism, nationalism and liberalism, and concepts such as trade unionism, through colonial territories. See Duncan Bell, 'Empire and Imperialism' in Gareth Steadman Jones and Gregory Claeys, *The Cambridge History of 19th Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 891–2.
- 25 For more on Northcote Thomas and other 'colonial anthropologists' in Britain's African empire, see McFate, *Military Anthropology*, 47–85.
- 26 Direct rule is largely self-explanatory. Indirect rule sought to exercise power and authority in an economical fashion by utilising local forms of government as part of the colonial machinery.
- 27 McFate, *Military Anthropology*, 47–85.
- 28 See Roy Dilley, *Nearly Native, Barely Civilized: Henri Gaden's Journey through Colonial French West Africa (1894–1939)* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 365.
- 29 McFate, *Military Anthropology*, 61. McFate refers specifically to the concept of 'functionalism'.
- 30 Unrest in British India, Egypt, the Dutch Indies and French Indochina, demands for emancipation in places such as Dahomey and Senegal, agitation by the anti-imperialist Comintern, and criticism from the United States and Germany. See L'Estoile et al., *Empires, Nations, and Natives*, 41.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 32 Sims, *The Human Terrain System*, 289.
- 33 The initial change in French policy from overt militarism to a more nuanced

form of penetration was initiated by Paul Bert, civilian resident-general for Annam and Tonkin, and implemented by Colonel Théophile Pennequin in late 1890. De Lannessan's arrival in the summer of 1891 capitalised upon this new policy.

- 34 J.K. Munholland, 'Collaboration Strategy and the French Pacification of Tonkin 1885–1897', *Historical Journal*, 24:3 (1981), 629–50.
- 35 On the French pacification campaign in Indochina more broadly, see Michael P. Finch *A Progressive Occupation? The Gallieni–Lyautey Method and Colonial Pacification in Tonkin and Madagascar, 1885–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 36 Stephen Ellis, *The Rising of the Red Shaws: A Revolt in Madagascar 1895–1899* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 37 Louis A. Perez, *Army Politics in Cuba 1898–1956* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press 1976), 6–7.
- 38 For an excellent discussion of French pacification doctrine during this period see Thomas Rid, 'The Nineteenth Century Origins of Counterinsurgency Doctrine', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33:5 (2010), 727–58.
- 39 William Hoisington, *Lyautey and the French Conquest of Morocco* (London: St Martin's Press, 1995), 15.
- 40 See Jean Michaud, 'French Military Ethnography in Colonial Upper Tonkin (Northern Vietnam), 1897–1904', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 8:4 (2013), 1–46.
- 41 With reference to the latter, see Karl A. Sleikeu, 'Winning the War in Afghanistan: An Oil Spot Plus Strategy for Coalition Forces', *Small Wars Journal* (May 2009), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/227-slaikeu.pdf>.
- 42 See *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972), 483.
- 43 Rid, 'Razzia', 626–8.
- 44 Jack C. Lane, *Armed Progressive: General Leonard Wood* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio 1978), 126. See also Jack McCallum, *Leonard Wood: Rough Rider, Surgeon, Architect of American Imperialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).
- 45 Christian Tripodi, 'Enlightened Pacification? Imperial Precedents for Current Stabilisation Operations', *Defence Studies*, 10:1–2 (2010), 40–74, at 54.
- 46 Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 54–5. The term 'ink spot' is synonymous with 'oil spot'.
- 47 Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 149–92. The imposition of settler communities in native lands was an incendiary cause of exterminatory levels of violence, both on the part of the soldiery charged with securing space for them, and by the settlers themselves in subsequently securing their position against a hostile native population. This was particularly the case in South-West Africa, where German colonial forces largely exterminated a native Herero and Namaqua population in the early 1900s in order to make way for a German settler community. For more on the violent methods that attended imperial expansion and rule see Bruce Vandervoort, *Wars of Imperial Conquest 1830–1914* (London: Routledge, 1998); Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave, 2010); and Huw Bennett, 'The

Other Side of the COIN: Minimum and Exemplary Force in British Army Counter-insurgency in Kenya', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 18:4 (2007), 638–64.

- 48 For example, the Abu Ghraib scandal and the repeated instances of abuse by British troops towards Iraqis. See Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Strategic Cost of Torture, Racism, and Bigotry* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2014); and Carla Ferstman et al., *The UK Military in Iraq: Efforts and Prospects for Accountability for International Crimes Allegations?* (Colchester: University of Essex Human Rights Centre, 2018).
- 49 Walter, *Colonial Violence*, 192.
- 50 Rohde, *Armed with Expertise: The Militarization of American Social Research during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 10.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 See www.rand.org/search.html?query=gerald%20hickey.
- 53 Gerald Hickey, *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Lubbock: Texas Technical University Press, 2002).
- 54 For this, and more on Hickey's experience in Vietnam, see David H. Price, *Cold War Anthropology: The CIA, the Pentagon, and the Growth of Dual Use Anthropology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 302–14.
- 55 See Andrew Birtle and his dissection of US COIN doctrine during the Vietnam era in his *US Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1942–1976* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2006), 244.
- 56 Tierney, 'Avoiding Nation-Building', 30.
- 57 Developed during the early 1990s and related to the Israeli doctrine of Systemic Operational Design, the 'effects-based approach' emphasised end-state goals first, using them as the starting point in planning the appropriate application of each of the elements of security – diplomatic, information, military and economic – to reach the desired end-state. Accordingly, EBO concepts traditionally take a 'systemic approach' to security challenges, evaluating the situation through the lens of strategic centres of gravity such as leadership; key essentials; infrastructure; population; and military forces. However, it was found to be far too complex to translate into action in the context of Iraq, where it 'Assumes a level of unachievable predictability; cannot correctly anticipate reactions of complex systems (for example, leadership, societies, political systems, and so forth); and calls for an unattainable level of knowledge of the enemy.' See James. N. Mattis, 'USJFCOM Commander's Guidance for Effects-Based Operations', *Parameters*, 51:4 (2008), 18–25, at 20.

4 'Peaceful Penetration' on the North-West Frontier, 1919–39

- 1 For a general overview of British tribal policy during this period see Christian Tripodi, *Edge of Empire: The British Political Officer on the North-West Frontier 1877–1947* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

- 2 The 'politicals' were named after their recruitment from the Foreign and Political Department of the Indian government (which was renamed the Indian Political Service in 1937). See Murray Hogben, 'The Foreign and Political Department of India 1876–1919: a study in imperial careers and attitudes', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1973; and Terence Creagh Coen, *The Indian Political Service: A Study in Indirect Rule* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971). For the purposes of this study, the terms 'political officer' and 'Political Service' are used.
- 3 See also Hugh Beattie, *Imperial Frontier: Tribe and State in Waziristan* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 4 Brandon Marsh, *Ramparts of Empire: British Imperialism and India's Afghan Frontier, 1918–1948* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015).
- 5 For more on these colonial administrative structures see Anthony Kirk-Greene, *On Crown Service: A History of HM Colonial and Overseas Civil Services, 1837–1997* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1999).
- 6 During the interwar period, there were areas where politicals were engaged in purely diplomatic roles, such as the independent 'princely' states of India, Tibet and Afghanistan. There were those where they engaged in diplomatic and administrative duties, such as Burma, the Gulf region and Mesopotamia, and the Crown colony of Aden. Finally there were the small number of places where government agents engaged in a wide range of diplomatic, administrative and military-support activities, namely the North-West Frontier, Baluchistan and the Aden Protectorate. For an idea of the full extent of the Government of India's diplomatic presence see James Onley, *The Arabian Frontier of the British Raj: Merchants, Rulers, and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Gulf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 7 Charles Miller, *Khyber: British India's North-West Frontier: The Story of an Imperial Migraine* (London: Macmillan, 1977); Victoria Schofield, *Every Rock, Every Hill: The Plain Tale of the North-West Frontier and Afghanistan* (London: Salem House, 1984); Jules Stewart, *The Khyber Rifles: From the British Raj to al-Qaeda* (London: The History Press, 2005) and *The Savage Border* (London: The History Press, 2007).
- 8 According to tribal directories, there were some 3,000 distinct 'units' in total within the tribal areas comprising a population of around 400,000 'fighters' (excluding dependants). For more on numbers, and tribal structures, see Alan Warren, *Waziristan, The Faqir of Ipi and the Indian Army: The North-West Frontier Revolt of 1936–37* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 9 For an overview of 'frontier' strategy and policy during this period see Robert Johnson, 'Russians at the Gates of India: Planning the Defence of India 1885–1890', *Journal of Military History*, 67:3 (2003), 697–743.
- 10 For more on the recruitment and training of political officers see Tripodi, *Edge of Empire*; and Coen, *The Indian Political Service*.
- 11 Akbar Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* (London: Routledge 1991), 36. An anthropologist by training, Ahmed was himself a former Pakistani political officer who served in Waziristan from 1978 to 1980.
- 12 For a detailed examination of these debates during the period under examination see Tripodi, *Edge of Empire*, 109–42 and 171–201.

- 13 For some idea of the amounts paid in the form of allowances, see British Library, London, IOR [India Office Records] MSS EUR [Private Papers, India Office Collection] D696/3, Papers Sir Arthur Parsons; Frontier Watch and Ward Committee, November 1936: 'Frontier Expenditure 1921–39'. Some idea of the amounts can be discerned by the fact that in 1946–7 the budget for education in the entire tribal area was 17,000 rupees, less than 10 per cent of the allowances paid to just one tribe, the Afridis, nearly twenty years earlier.
- 14 For similar arguments see IOR L/PS [Political and Secret Department Records] 12 [Political (External) Files and Collections 1903–50] 3278 Note by Colonel Leslie Mallam, PA Malakand, 'On the case for Tribal Self Government', 26 July 1945.
- 15 St Anthony's College, Oxford, MEC [Middle East Centre Archives] GB165-0138, [Papers of Sir William Rupert Hay] Box 10/1: Yearly Report for Political Agent South Waziristan 1926. Hay (1893–1962) was senior political agent (Resident) in Waziristan in 1940–1.
- 16 For the specificities of Pashtun culture, see Ahmed, *Resistance and Control*; and Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North-West Frontier* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 17 Tripodi, *Edge of Empire*, 148.
- 18 For a personal account of serving in command of *khassadari* see Frank L. Leeson, *Frontier Legion: With the Khassadars of North Waziristan* (West Sussex: The Leeson Archive, 2003).
- 19 The various frontier security units are also discussed in Christian Tripodi, 'Power and Patronage: A Comparison of Tribal Service in Waziristan and South-West Arabia 1919–45', *War & Society*, 33:3 (2014), 172–93.
- 20 See Brian Robson, *Crisis on the Frontier: The Third Afghan War and the Campaign in Waziristan 1919–20* (London: Spellmount, 2004).
- 21 A position at Razmak allowed the army to threaten Mahsud crops. See IOR L/PS 18 [Political and Secret Department: Memoranda 1840–1947] A189 Viceroy, Foreign and Political Department to Sec of State for India 23 March 1920.
- 22 Tripodi, *Power and Patronage*, 188.
- 23 IOR L/PS/12/3171 Proceeds of the Tribal Defence and Control Committee of August 1931. A copy of the report can also be found in the private papers of Sir Arthur Parsons. See IOR MSS EUR D696/3.
- 24 The year 1930–1 had seen an acute global recession 'unparalleled in its intensity and the widespread nature of its reactions'. See *India 1930–31 Vol XIII: Statement prepared for presentation to Parliament in accordance with the requirements of the 26th section of the Government of India Act* (Delhi, 1985).
- 25 IOR R/12 [India Office Collection, Records of the British legation Kabul 1922–30] 90 [Foreign and Political Department, Secret] – Letter from the Foreign Secretary of the Government of India to the Under Secretary of State India Office, Simla 12 July 1933 – Material Assistance to the Afghan Govt.

- 26 Tribal Research Cell, (TRC) Peshawar Museum, Pakistan. File Number 197 1258, Bundle 45, Sir James Acheson to Sir R. Griffith, Dera Ismail Khan (DIK) 10 January 1936, Hassan Khel Situation.
- 27 IOR MSS EUR D 696/3 Private Papers Sir Arthur Parsons. Coleridge memorandum 6 March 1934.
- 28 IOR MSS Eur D/670/28 Private Papers Sir George Cunningham 'Tribes of the NWFP' World Review February 1947. For more on the political economy of the tribal areas see R. Christensen, 'Tribesmen, Government and Political Economy on the North-West Frontier' in Barbara Ingham and Colin Simmons (eds.) *Development Studies and Colonial Policies* (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1987), 175–93.
- 29 The blood feud was a notable aspect of tribal life – if a tribesman killed another, he was essentially fair game for as long as it took for the relatives of the victim to kill *him*. Although a blood settlement could be agreed at jirga, and indeed this was often the case, the feud was still prevalent.
- 30 See IOR L/PS/12/3172 North-West Frontier policy Watch and Ward: Report of the NWFP Subjects Committee July 1931, 335.
- 31 IOR MSS EUR D696/3. Parsons papers.
- 32 For an alternative view of the British–Mahsud relationship in particular, see Mark Condos and Gavin Rand, 'Coercion and Conciliation at the Edge of Empire: State Building and its Limits in Waziristan 1849–1914', *Historical Journal*, 68:3 (2018), 695–718.
- 33 See *British Intelligence on the North-West Frontier, 1901–1949: India Office Political and Secret Reports on Tribes and Terrorism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
- 34 By 1933, and with the help of RAF photo-reconnaissance, this information had evolved into the Tribal Directory. Compiled and overseen by the Tribal Directory Office, part of the Provincial Intelligence Bureau (PIB), the Directory was an index of all types of intelligence concerning each of the tribes within the 14,800 square miles of the tribal agencies of the NWF. Each village was photographed from the air, and on the reverse side of each photo were the full particulars of that village: constructional details, number of caves, towers, hamlets and the precise location of the dwellings of influential persons. The Tribal Directory was intended to list all villages belonging to a certain tribe, to provide a quick and accessible format for accessing information and generate a comprehensive photographic mosaic of the areas surrounding any particular village and record any new developments. See Tripodi, *Edge of Empire*, 177.
- 35 The fakir of Ipi uprising of 1936, which saw some 40,000 troops deployed into Waziristan ostensibly to combat the influence of a powerful religious firebrand, was in fact well understood by the Political Department to have been caused by its own mishandling of an inter-tribal dispute. See IOR L/PS/12/3192 PZ 9181 Political Department (Secret) Weekly summary no 48, 30 November 1936.
- 36 Some were highly fluent, of course. The political officer Jack 'Lotus' Lewis was reputed to dream in Pashtu. See Charles Chenevix-Trench, *The Viceroy's Agent* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), 275.
- 37 Some political officers felt that the nature of the job forced the necessary expertise upon them. One noted, rather wryly, 'When I arrived in Miranshah

- on the afternoon of 5 October 1943 I was a complete tyro; yet when I left the agency on Thursday 6 July 1944 I felt I was a hardened and experienced political officer, wise to the wiles of the Wazir and capable of confronting him without being outguessed.’ See Frazer Noble, *Something in India: A Memoir of Service in the Frontier Province* (Edinburgh: Pentland Press, 1987), 168.
- 38 IOR L/PS/12/3278. Note by Colonel Leslie Mallam, political agent Malakand, ‘On the case for Tribal Self Government’, 26 July 1945.
 - 39 See Evelyn Howell, *Mizh: A Monograph on the Government’s Relations with the Mashud Tribe* (Simla: Government of India Press, 1931); and Leslie Mallam, *Frogs in the Well* (London: Librario 2011).
 - 40 Sir William Hay, in a debate with Sir Olaf Caroe and Colonel Leslie Mallam, MEC Hay Papers, Box 10/4 Letter as Resident, Waziristan to Leslie Mallam, political agent Malakand, 9 April 1941.
 - 41 Beattie, *Imperial Frontier*, 73.
 - 42 Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, 26.
 - 43 IOR L/PS/12/3278 26 July 1945. Note by Colonel Leslie Mallam on the case for Tribal Self Government. For more on Mallam’s attitudes toward such matters see his memoirs *Frogs in the Well*.
 - 44 The Foreign and Political Department had issued a manual of instructions for political officers in 1924, but this was intended for officers serving in the independent ‘princely’ states and did not apply to those engaged in tribal administration on the Frontier.
 - 45 IOR MSS EUR F163/15 Private papers, Richard Bruce, ‘Mahsud and Waziri Operations’ Note by Mr Pipon, Assistant Commissioner, Tank 1899–1902, 14 November 1903.
 - 46 Condos and Rands, ‘Coercion and Conciliation’, 695–718.
 - 47 For the definitive account of the Indian Army on the Frontier during this period see Tim Moreman, *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).
 - 48 See Tim Moreman, ‘Watch and Ward on the North-West Frontier 1920–1939’ in David Killingray and David Omissi (eds.) *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers 1700–1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 137–57.
 - 49 John Masters, *Bugles and a Tiger* (New York: Viking Press, 1956), 195–7.
 - 50 Jackson, ‘Defeat in victory’, 77.
 - 51 IOR MSS EUR D/696/3 Memorandum by Sir James Acheson, Frontier Watch and Ward Committee, 19 November 1936.

5 ‘Hearts and Minds’ vs French Revolutionary War: Algeria, 1954–62

- 1 Peter Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria: The Analysis of a Political and Military Doctrine* (Princeton: Pall Mall, 1964), 48.
- 2 For a history of the war in Algeria see Martin Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–62* (London: Macmillan, 2012).

- 3 There was a military putsch by senior officers in Algeria in April 1961 opposed to the government's negotiations with the FLN and the possibility of Algerian independence signalled by the referendum of January 1961. Out of this rebellion came the Organisation Armée Secret (OAS), a terrorist organisation populated by former military officers opposed to Algerian independence and who unleashed a wave of violent attacks in Algeria and mainland France from 1961 to 1963, killing some 2,000 people.
- 4 A sister unit, the Section Administrative Urbaine (SAU), operated in urban areas.
- 5 Jackson, 'Defeat in Victory', 422.
- 6 Ibid., 317–18.
- 7 For a broad history of the SAS in the Algerian War see Christophe Trombert, *Les sections administratives spécialisées et la fusion du social et du sécuritaire en matière de contrôle social* (HAL Archives, January 2013), <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00718804v3>; and Gregor Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie. Entre idéal et réalité 1955–1962* (Paris: L'Éditions Harmattan, 1998). See also Colin Jackson, 'Government in a Box? Counterinsurgency, Statebuilding and the Technocratic Conceit' in Celeste Ward Gventer, David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith (eds.) *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective* (London: Palgrave, 2014), 82–111.
- 8 There was also, from the beginning, a separate so-called reinforced SAS, a small unit staffed by Algerian Affairs officers but operating purely within the military command structure, which was detailed to actively support military operations as well as psychological warfare activities.
- 9 Trombert, *Les sections administratives spécialisées*, 3.
- 10 Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre (SHAT) de Vincennes, Paris. Archives cabinet militaire de la délégation générale du gouvernement en Algérie, 1.H.2026 (Participation de l'armée aux tâches de pacification) 4–11, 12 October 1959, General of Constantine – Directive no. 7, on the consolidation of the pacification process.
- 11 Trombert, *Les sections administrative spécialisées*, 5.
- 12 Cahier de la Recherche Doctrinale: *Gagner les cœurs et les esprits; origine historique du concept actuelle en Afghanistan* (Paris: Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, 2010), 17.
- 13 François Partiot, 'Organisation et activité des S.A.S' in *République Française, Délégation Général en Algérie: Algérie d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 11 (1960), 21.
- 14 Jacques Fréméaux, *Les SAS (Section Administrative Spécialisée) Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 208, Dossier: Aspects militaires de la guerre d'Algérie (octobre–décembre 2002), 57.
- 15 John Humphrey, 'Nationalism and the colonial situation in Algeria under French rule 1830–1962', unpublished PhD thesis, University of York (1976), 470–1.
- 16 Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 49. Paret observes that the SAU also operated in metropolitan France in an effort to address domestic support for Algerian independence.
- 17 SHAT 1.H. 1096 (P.V. de réunion sur les affaires civiles) 1–5, 28 June 1960, Report of the Committee of Algerian Affairs.

- 18 SHAT 1.H. 2028 (Organisation des SAS) 23–24, ‘Report on mood of the staff’ (1958).
- 19 Humphrey, ‘Nationalism and the colonial situation in Algeria’, 472–3. Obviously, the majority of these camps were anything but the sort envisaged by the SAS, with widespread deprivation, disease, food shortages and increased mortality a constant feature of life in the camps. There is widespread dispute over the number of Algerians subject to ‘regroupement’. One estimate puts the number at 2,500,000 over the course of the war. See Alfred Heggoy, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Algeria* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), 213–16. Christopher Griffin uses French government figures to put the figure of resettled Algerians at 1,282,000 by 1960. See ‘Major Combat Operations and Counterinsurgency Warfare: Plan Challe in Algeria, 1959–1960’, *Security Studies*, 19:3 (2010), 555–89, at 582.
- 20 Dalia Ait-el-Djoudi, *La guerre d’Algérie vue par l’ALN, 1954–1962: L’Armée française sous la regard des combattants algériens* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2007), 136.
- 21 See David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Praeger, 2006).
- 22 For more on Charles Lacheroy and the theory of ‘Revolutionary War’ see Michael P.M. Finch, ‘A Total War of the Mind: The French Theory of *la guerre révolutionnaire*, 1954–1958’, *War in History*, 25:3 (2017), 410–34; Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*; and Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 180–1.
- 23 Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 65. See also Raoul Girardet, ‘Civil and Military Power in the Fourth Republic’ in Samuel Huntington (ed.) *Changing Patterns of Military Politics* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1962), 121–49.
- 24 Finch, ‘A Total War of the Mind’, 11.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 26 Jackson, ‘Defeat in victory’, 342–68. The new French commander in chief in Algeria would be General Raoul Salan, who took command in 1956 after serving as commander in chief of French forces in Indochina and who would be one of the central figures of the ’61 putsch.
- 27 Finch, ‘A Total War of the Mind’, 7–12; Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 173–4; and Jackson, ‘Defeat in victory’, 407–68.
- 28 See Michael D. Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 135–66.
- 29 Jackson, ‘Defeat in victory’, 423–39.
- 30 David Galula noted during his service in Algeria that the military systems of awards and promotions was ‘rigged in favour of “warriors”’. Medals were given on the basis of valour in combat. If there was no combat because the commander had succeeded in pacifying his area, too bad for him – no medals.’ See Galula, *Pacification in Algeria, 1956–1958* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006), 65.
- 31 Partiot, ‘Organisation et activité des S.A.S’, 10.
- 32 For an excellent overview of the French military campaign during this period see Griffin, ‘Major Combat Operations and Counterinsurgency Warfare’, 566–89.
- 33 Figures range from the hundreds to up to 12,000. See Evans, *Algeria: France’s Undeclared War*, 141.

- 34 Jackson, 'Defeat in Victory', 330.
- 35 SHAT, 1.H.2026 4–11, 12 October 1959, General of Constantine – Directive no. 7, on the consolidation of the pacification process. Paras. 13–14 of the report state that the final stage of the campaign against the FLN would culminate when 'the rebels are annihilated, local people are loyal to France, and adjoining regions do not constitute a threat'.
- 36 SHAT 1.H. 2028 (23–24 Report on mood of the staff, 1958).
- 37 SHAT 1.H. 1096 1–5 (Committee on Algerian Affairs, 28 June 1960).
- 38 Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 157–68.
- 39 See Muriam Haleh Davis, 'Restaging *Mise en Valeur*: "Postwar Imperialism" and The *Plan de Constantine*', *Review of Middle East Studies*, 44:2 (2010), 176–86.
- 40 For more on SAS training see Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie*, 30–5.
- 41 Originally created in 1937 and later renamed the Centre for Advanced Studies on Africa and Modern Asia (Centre de Hautes Études sur l'Afrique et l'Asie Modernes), its significance grew from 1950 as it focused on deepening the knowledge of civil servants and military officials based in overseas territories, particularly in North Africa and the Levant, and who were now confronting challenges to French colonial rule.
- 42 The abrupt termination of French administration of Morocco in 1956 freed up a number of IA officers for service with the SAS. Without this fortuitous and unrelated development the SAS would have been unable to generate the skills required for its mission. With respect to poor language skills see Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie*, 37, and also an official report into the SAS which stated that with respect to SAS personnel, 'Most do not speak any Arabic: out of 10, 2 have mid-level knowledge of Arabic, 6 know the basics, and 2 do not know any Arabic'. See SHAT, 1. H.2028 paras. 23–24 (Report on mood of the staff, 1958).
- 43 See Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie*, 38. An *autodéfense* is a village self-defence force.
- 44 Humphrey, 'Nationalism and the colonial situation in Algeria', 476–7. Humphrey is quoting General Partiot, 'Organisation et activité des S.A.S', 9.
- 45 SHAT, 1.H.2485/2 (Coupure de presse sur les réfugiés et la S.A.S), 1959. According to Partiot, only 15 of the 700 SAS team leaders in 1960 were Muslims. See 'Organisation et activités des SAS en République Française, Délégation Générale en Algérie' in *Algérie Aujourd'hui*, no. 11 (Algiers, 1960), 25.
- 46 Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie*, 59.
- 47 Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 51.
- 48 For more on the concept of 'underadministration' in relation to the Algerian War see Humphrey, 'Nationalism and the colonial situation in Algeria', 411–15.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 'The conviction dawned that it was a hopeless struggle, that the task was essentially unrealizable and would have continuously to be taken up and begun all over again – an absurd pursuit of a quarry which slipped away as

- soon as it seemed to come within grasp.’ See Raoul Girardet (ed.) *The French Military Crisis (1945–1962): Sociological and Ideological Aspects* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1964), 209.
- 51 For details of the technical aspect of French counterinsurgency doctrine in Algeria, particularly with respect to population control see Griffin, ‘Major Combat Operations and Counterinsurgency Warfare’, 575–9; Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 180–96; and Martin S. Alexander and J.F.V. Keiger (eds) *France and the Algerian War, 1954–62: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2002).
 - 52 Mathias, *Les sections administratives spécialisées en Algérie*, 45.
 - 53 Ibid. Maillard provided some retrospectively amusing anecdotes. He reports the questioning of a villager. Maillard: ‘How many children to you have?’ Villager: ‘I don’t know.’ Maillard: ‘You don’t know how many children you have?’ Villager: ‘No.’ Maillard (pointing): ‘What about those two over there? Are they yours?’ Villager: ‘Yes.’ Maillard: So you have two children? Villager: ‘No.’
 - 54 For a comparison of the relative depth of French administration in Morocco see Robin Bidwell, *Morocco under Colonial Rule: French Administration in the Tribal Areas 1912–1956* (London: Frank Cass, 1973), 174–5.
 - 55 For more on the activities of the EMSI see Jennifer Johnson, *The Battle for Algeria: Sovereignty, Health Care, and Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 53.
 - 56 Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 190–1.
 - 57 SHAT, 1H 1216, 3/2 (Département de Medea, arrondissement de Boghari 1961). Evidence suggests that Algerian women were encouraged by the ESMI to treat the veil as they would the presence of disease-carrying animals and insects within the home. See Synne L. Divik, *Gendering Counterinsurgency: Performativity, Experience and Embodiment in the Afghan ‘Theatre of War’* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 100.
 - 58 For a sense of the importance attached to educational initiatives by the French in Algeria see Galula, *Pacification in Algeria*, 57–164.
 - 59 Gregor Mathias, *Galula in Algeria: Counterinsurgency Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Praeger, 2011), 32.
 - 60 Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 51.
 - 61 SHAT, 1 H.1216 4–11, 1–2 (District de Tablat, activités du personnel des affaires algériennes), 1959.
 - 62 Jennifer Johnson, *The Battle for Algeria: Sovereignty, Healthcare and Humanitarianism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 42.
 - 63 SHAT, 1.H.1211 (Rapport sur le moral du personnel des Affaires Algériennes 1956–1959 et 1960–1961) 15–16 Memo no. 5731/CC, 10 November 1958, General Raoul Salan, ‘Le rôle du S.A.S.’.
 - 64 On the wisdom of French strategy in this respect, see Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 191.
 - 65 Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare*, 52.
 - 66 For more on the wider international dimension see Martin S. Thomas, *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations, 1945–62* (London: Macmillan, 2000).
 - 67 Humphrey, ‘Nationalism and the colonial situation in Algeria’, 474.

6 Pacification in Vietnam, 1964–72

- 1 Neil Sheehan, author of *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (London: Pimlico, 1998), quoted in Ken Burns and Lyn Novick, PBS America Documentary *The Vietnam War* (2017).
- 2 Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (London: Random House, 1995); H.R. McMaster, *Derelection of Duty: Johnson, McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Lies That Led to the Vietnam War* (Harper Collins, 1998); Gabriel Kolko, *Vietnam: Anatomy of a War* (New York: The New Press, 1994).
- 3 Perhaps the most articulate critique on these lines is Andrew F. Krepinevich's seminal *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986).
- 4 See in particular Gregory Daddis's three most recent works: *Withdrawal: Reassessing American's Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and *No Sure Victory: Measuring US Army Effectiveness in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Jonathan D. Caverley, 'The Myth of Military Myopia: Democracy, Small Wars, and Vietnam', *International Security*, 34:3 (2009/10), 119–57; Martin Clemis, *The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam 1968–1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018); and Marc Jason Gilbert (ed.) *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (London: Palgrave, 2002). For a fascinating enquiry as to the psychological dimension of US strategic decision-making in relation to the war, see Payne, *The Psychology of Strategy*.
- 5 For an excellent critique of COIN's tendency toward non-strategic perspectives see Mike L.R. Smith and David Martin Jones, 'Counterinsurgency and Strategy: Problems and Paradoxes' in their *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency: Strategic Problems, Puzzles and Paradoxes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 29–55.
- 6 See Andrew Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Thomas Richardson, *Destroy and Build: Pacification in Phuoc Thuy, 1966–72* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Christopher Fisher, 'Nation Building and the Vietnam War', *Pacific Historical Review*, 75:4 (2005), 441–56.
- 7 Michael D. Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of US Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 241–54. On the lack of leverage exerted by the United States over the Diem regime in particular, see Walter C. Ladwig III, 'The Puppet That Pulled Its Own Strings? Vietnam 1957–63' in *The Forgotten Front*, 144–212.
- 8 See Porch *Counterinsurgency*, 205–19.
- 9 See Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); Eric M. Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (London: Routledge, 2018); Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*; Richardson, *Destroy and Build*; and Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*.

- 10 Huntington, *Political Security and Stability in South Vietnam*; Michael E. Latham, 'Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation-Building in South Vietnam', *Third World Quarterly*, 27:1 (2006), 27–41; and Clemis *The Control War*.
- 11 In 1971 MACV estimated that there were between 10,000 and 12,000 hamlets in the republic of Vietnam. See Clemis, *The Control War*, 90.
- 12 For an excellent survey of the US advisory effort during this early period, see Jacqueline Hazelton, 'The Client Gets a Vote: Counterinsurgency Warfare and the US Military Advisory Mission in South Vietnam, 1954–1965', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 43:1 (2020), 126–53.
- 13 Latham quotes one report which observed that while 70 local families agreed to move into secure dwellings, some 140 others were resettled at gunpoint. All were forced to build new homes and dig trenches in the new hamlets while South Vietnamese soldiers burned their former dwellings. By May, '[e]ven the government newspaper admitted that after six weeks only about 7% of the district's 38000 peasants had permanently relocated either voluntarily or by force'. See 'Redirecting the Revolution', 36.
- 14 For a more detailed examination of the failures to secure South Vietnamese government reform as part of the advisory effort see Hazelton, 'The Client Gets a Vote'. For a personal account of the pacification strategy between 1963 and 1968 see George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (London: Random House, 2019), chs. 1–6.
- 15 See Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 144–212. Subsequent to Diem's toppling and assassination in November 1963, rule passed to a military junta until September 1967, when a civilian administration under President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was sworn in.
- 16 For more on the CORDS initiative see Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 66–94.
- 17 Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 143
- 18 For the Phoenix Program see Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).
- 19 Rostow had left MIT's Center for International Studies to become the chair of the State Department's Policy Planning Council under Kennedy and would become national security advisor under Lyndon Johnson.
- 20 'Modern' equals cosmopolitan, mobile, controlling of the environment, welcoming of change and characterised by a complex division of labour: Europe, the USA and USSR. 'Traditional' equals inward-looking, inert, passive toward nature, superstitious, fearful of change and economically simple: Latin America, Asia and Africa en masse. See Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 5.
- 21 For more on the interrelationship between modernisation theory and counterinsurgency, see Smith and Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency*, 61.
- 22 There was of course a much wider academic discourse happening during the course of the Vietnam War on the subject of nation-building. See Jefferson

- P. Marquis, 'The Other Warriors: Social Science and Nation Building in Vietnam', *Diplomatic History*, 24:1 (2000), 79–105.
- 23 Richardson, *Destroy and Build*, 12.
- 24 Under the imprimatur of Edward Lansdale, the senior CIA officer in South Vietnam in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the concept of 'Parapolitics' would seek to create small teams of indigenous operatives working through the villages in order to understand and address the grievances of the local population and help recast the link between them and the government. For more on Lansdale's influence and thinking during this period see James McAllister, 'The Lost Revolution: Edward Lansdale and the American Defeat in Vietnam 1964–1968', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 14:2 (2003), 1–26; and Packer, *Our Man*, 26–9.
- 25 Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 43–5.
- 26 See James McAllister, 'Who Lost Vietnam? Soldiers, Civilians, and US Military Strategy', *International Security*, 35:3 (2010), 95–123.
- 27 Richardson, *Destroy and Build*, 25.
- 28 Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 142.
- 29 Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 97.
- 30 Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 182. See also Huntington, *Political Security and Stability in South Vietnam*, appendix: 'Accommodation and the American Presence', 9.
- 31 Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 142–3.
- 32 Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 14.
- 33 Phi-Vân Nguyen, 'A Secular State for a Religious Nation: The Republic of Vietnam and Religious Nationalism, 1946–1963', *Modern Asian Studies*, 77:3 (2018), 741–71.
- 34 Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms*, 261–8.
- 35 At the time of the Geneva settlement, one-quarter of 1 per cent of the rural population owned a full 40 per cent of rice land in the South. Some 57 per cent of the peasantry were forced to rent the land they cultivated, often at rates requiring them to give up over half of what they produced. See Latham, 'Redirecting the Revolution', 29.
- 36 Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 205.
- 37 General Creighton Abrams succeeded General William Westmoreland as commander MACV June 1968–June 1972.
- 38 Packer, *Our Man*, 66.
- 39 Hunt, *Pacification*, 61.
- 40 Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty First Century General* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 205. Also see Julian Ewell and Ira Hunt, *Sharpening the Edge: The Use of Analysis to Reinforce Military Judgement* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1974).
- 41 See Kevin Buckley, 'Pacification's Deadly Price', *Newsweek*, June 1972, 42–3.
- 42 Andrew Krepinevich notes that the during this period the US army expended on average 1,000 rounds of artillery fire to kill one enemy combatant. See *The Army and Vietnam*, 222.
- 43 Ibid., 222–7.
- 44 Hunt, *Pacification*, 223.

- 45 For more on the largely indistinguishable changes in military behaviours between Westmoreland's and Abrams's tenures as USMACV commanders, see Gian Gentile, 'The Conceit of American Counterinsurgency' in Gventer et al., *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective*, 247–8.
- 46 This is broadly the argument pursued by Krepinevich in *The Army and Vietnam*, 197–205. However, recent scholarship has disputed this reading of events, particularly Daddis in *Westmoreland's War*, and Hazelton, who argues that Krepinevich is empirically mistaken in arguing that the US army displayed little interest in COIN theory or practice in Vietnam. See 'The Client Gets a Vote', 126–31.
- 47 *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 517.
- 48 Mark Frankel interview with Bruce Kinsey, 'CORDS: A Foreign Service Officer in Vietnam', *West Point Center for Oral History* (November 2012), www.westpointcoh.org/interviews/cords-a-foreign-service-officer-in-vietnam.
- 49 A not unreasonable fear, as evinced by the paratrooper revolt of November 1960 when three battalions of GVN troops mutinied.
- 50 Observers claim that the ARVN methods were more appropriate to the European fronts of World War II than a guerrilla war. See Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency*, 323. Shockingly, the GVN senior leadership openly acknowledged that many of the 30,000 casualties it claimed to have inflicted on the VC in 1962 were in reality innocent civilians. See Ladwig, *The Forgotten Front*, 193.
- 51 Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 40.
- 52 Birtle claims that the military were mostly right on this question. See *US Army Counterinsurgency*, 312.
- 53 For more on the organisational structure of the CORDS programme, see *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 488–91.
- 54 A sequence, Gregory Daddis reminds us, that was subscribed to by 'enlightened' COIN thinkers such as David Galula. See *Westmoreland's War*, 25–33.
- 55 For an excellent distillation of the 'Security vs Control' debate, see Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 94–101.
- 56 FM 31-16 advised that offensive operations be undertaken whenever a sizable force or installation had been located, and that the most effective counter-guerrilla tactic was encirclement. When conditions prohibited using encirclement, FM 31-16 offered a number of other methods for conducting offensive surprise attack and pursuit. See Birtle, *US Army Counterinsurgency*, 244. Daddis points to the doctrine's use of terms such as 'continuous pressure' and 'aggressive action'. See *Westmoreland's War*, 25.
- 57 See Field Manual (FM) 31-16 (Counterinsurgency Operations) (Washington, DC: Headquarters of the Army, 1970), 111.
- 58 Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 131.
- 59 Going so far as to establish a small study group to explore the feasibility of such an action, Westmoreland bemoaned the subsequent order from Washington to desist. 'I felt at the time', he said, 'and even more so now that to fail to consider such an alternative was a mistake.' See William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 338.
- 60 Hazelton, *The Client Gets a Vote*, 141–3.
- 61 *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 481.

- 62 Ibid., 482.
- 63 For more on the US army's history as a 'political' actor see Andrew Birtle, *US Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860–1941* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2009).
- 64 Daddis, *Westmoreland's War*, 34.
- 65 Ibid., 77.
- 66 Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 5.
- 67 Precise numbers are difficult to discern, but US government memoranda provide the figure of roughly 2,500 advisors in total, spread across provincial and district duties throughout South Vietnam. *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 513.
- 68 See J.C. Donnell and Gerald Hickey, *The Vietnamese Strategic Hamlets: A Preliminary Report* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, September 1962), www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM3208.html. Somewhat instructively, when the Diem regime was overthrown in 1963 the GVN ended the SHP immediately.
- 69 Price, *Cold War Anthropology*, 312.
- 70 Vann was a former US army officer whose lengthy service in Vietnam as both district and province advisor, as well as a deputy CORDS commander and advisor to US Army V and II Corps, marked him out as an exceptional operator. He was killed in a helicopter crash in 1972. For the most detailed analysis of Vann's career in Vietnam see Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*.
- 71 Hunt, *Pacification*, 95.
- 72 Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 156.
- 73 The reliance upon interpreters was noted as a significant and often damaging limitation for coalition forces operating in Afghanistan after the invasion of 2001. See Anderson, *No Worse Enemy*, xxi.
- 74 Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 151.
- 75 'Letter from Lieutenant General Vinh Loc to William E. Colby, with Attached Vietnam Training Center Schedule (16 September–25 October 1968)', *Texas Tech University*, accessed at www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/044/0440431005.pdf.
- 76 *The Vietnam Village 1970: A Handbook for Advisors* (Translations & Publications Branch, Management Support Directorate, CORDS, APO 96243, May 1970), 1.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Gawthorpe reveals one candidate who admitted that the VTC was his first exposure to the idea that insurgencies had political causes and needed political solutions. *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 153.
- 79 Ibid., 151.
- 80 Ibid. For an overview of the VTC experience as a whole, see 151–6.
- 81 Krepinevich states that the ARVN sources described the professional expertise of US army officers to be 'minimal' for what the war required. See *The Army and Vietnam*, 229.
- 82 Communist areas were not evaluated, only catalogued. According to American intelligence analyst Thomas C. Thayer, the system 'was designed to yield comprehensive, quantifiable data on the security and development of every hamlet in South Vietnam under some degree of GVN control and to

- identify hamlets under VC/NVA'. See Martin Clemis, 'The control war: Communist revolutionary warfare, pacification and the struggle for South Vietnam, 1968–1975', unpublished PhD thesis, Temple University (2015), 94.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 93–5. The HES security indicator contained such an amalgam of various related factors that hamlets could receive a high security rating and yet still contain enough of a communist presence to preclude effective government control. One hamlet was recorded as being simultaneously under the control of the VC and GVN. On the problem of the 'lies' and 'self-deception' associated with pacification metrics, see Packer, *Our Man*, 78.
- 84 Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 120–1.
- 85 Huntington, *Political Security and Stability in South Vietnam*, appendix: 'Accommodation and the American Presence', 86.
- 86 Gawthorpe, *To Build As Well As Destroy*, 146. See also Stathis N. Kalyvas and Mathew Adam Kocher, 'The Dynamics of Violence in Vietnam: An Analysis of the Hamlet Evaluation System (HES)', *Journal of Peace Research*, 46:3 (2009), 336–55, at 336.
- 87 Clemis, 'The control war', 99.
- 88 Daddis, *No Sure Victory*, 121.
- 89 Burns and Novick, *The Vietnam War*, episode 4.
- 90 For a critique of the 'good governance' theory of COIN see Hazelton, 'The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy', 82–5.
- 91 Marquis, 'The Other Warriors', 105.
- 92 Huntington, *Political Security and Stability in South Vietnam*, part II 'Pacification', 8.
- 93 Samuel P. Huntington, 'The Bases of Accommodation', *Foreign Affairs* 46:4 (July 1968), 642–56, at 644.
- 94 Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 179–80.
- 95 Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 111–14.
- 96 Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 96.
- 97 Huntington, 'The Bases of Accommodation', 648–9.
- 98 Huntington identified the Hoa Hoa, Cao Dai, rural Buddhist organisations and those political parties such as the Tan Dai Vietc and Hoa Hoa Social Democratic Party which had a degree of established presence in certain areas. See Huntington, *Political Security and Stability in South Vietnam*, part II 'Pacification', summary, vii.
- 99 Andrew Gawthorpe, 'Mad Dog? Samuel Huntington and the Vietnam War', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 41:1–2 (2018), 301–25, at 312.
- 100 *Ibid.*
- 101 Packer, *Our Man*, 52.
- 102 *The Pentagon Papers*, vol. 2, 485.
- 103 Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat*, 5.
- 104 Shafer, 'The Unlearned Lessons of Counterinsurgency', *Political Science Quarterly*, 103:1 (1988), 57–81, at 68.
- 105 Daddis gives the figure of around 80,000 NLF neutralised, with around 20,000 of that figure killed. See *Withdrawal*, 97.

- 106 Marquis, 'The Other Warriors', 105.
- 107 Andrew J. Birtle 'Persuasion and Coercion in Counterinsurgency Warfare', *Military Review* (July–August 2008), 45–53, at 51, accessed at www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20080831_art009.pdf.
- 108 Walt Rostow, *Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Foreign Aid: Ideas and Actions* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 50.
- 109 Michael Herr, quoted in Daddis, *Withdrawal*, 95.

7 Political Warfare in Iraq: Al Anbar and Basra, 2006–9

- 1 Rachel Schellner, US State Department Representative in Basra, 2005–7, quoted in Porch, *Counterinsurgency*, 309.
- 2 Carter Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory: The Anbar Awakening and the Rise of Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 11.
- 3 See Michael E. Silverman, *Awakening Victory: How Iraqi Tribes and American Troops Reclaimed Al Anbar and Defeated Al Qaeda in Iraq* (London: Casemate, 2011); Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin, 2009); and David Petraeus, 'How We Won in Iraq', *Foreign Policy* (October 2013), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/10/29/how-we-won-in-iraq/>.
- 4 Bacevich, *Washington Rules*, 206–9.
- 5 For a contemporary example of the desire to transplant an Anbar method to Afghanistan, see Richard Minister and Sebastyan Gorka, 'How Iraq Could Win the War in Afghanistan', *Atlantic Council* (December 2009), <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-iraq-could-win-the-war-in-afghanistan/>.
- 6 Glen Rangwala, 'Counterinsurgency amid Fragmentation: The British in Southern Iraq', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 32:3 (2009), 495–513, at 495.
- 7 For more detail on this period and particularly the effect of the coalition invasion on domestic Iraqi politics see Glen Rangwala and Eric Herring, *Iraq in Fragments: The Occupation and Its Legacy* (London: Hurst and Co., 2006).
- 8 Richard H. Schultz, *The Marines Take Anbar: The Four Year Fight against Al Qaeda* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013), 27.
- 9 Nigel Alwyn-Foster, 'Changing the Army for Counterinsurgency Operations', *Military Review* (November–December 2005), 2–16, at 2. The article was written by a British army officer, at the invitation of US commanders, and was highly critical of the US army's reliance upon firepower and kinetics at that stage in the campaign (2004–5).
- 10 For an examination of the impact of McMaster's techniques in Tal Afar, and their ultimate lack of durability, see Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1: *Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War 2003–2006* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2019), 448–53.
- 11 *The Small Wars Manual*, first published in 1935, with a definitive volume published in 1941, is considered a model of COIN thinking. The Combined Action Program (CAP) of the late 1960s involved teams of Marines living

- within Vietnamese villages, forming and working alongside indigenous militias.
- 12 Timothy S. McWilliams and Kurtis P. Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1: *American Perspectives: US Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004–2009* (Quantico, VA: US Marine Corps Press, 2009), interview in June 2009 with General James M. Mattis, June 2009, 21–38.
 - 13 Schultz, *The Marines Take Anbar*, 8.
 - 14 Ibid., 71.
 - 15 McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1, quoting Major Ben Connable, 124.
 - 16 Rangwala and Herring, *Iraq in Fragments*, 113.
 - 17 McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1, interview in March 2009 with Colonel Michael Walker, CO 3rd Civil Affairs Group, 1 MEF, October 2005–September 2006, 61–75.
 - 18 Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman and Jacob Shapiro point to four occasions prior to September 2006, the date of the ‘Awakening’, when US forces had supported tribal fighters: with the Abu Nimr in 2004, the Albu Mahal in the spring of 2005, the so-called Desert Protectors militia of autumn 2005 and lastly the tribally based Provincial Security Council of late that same year. See ‘Testing the Surge’, 20–2.
 - 19 Interestingly, the intelligence that led to al-Zarqawi’s death came from fellow militants disgusted at an AQI bomb attack in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005, which led to the killing of some sixty innocent Muslim civilians. See Jason Burke, *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy* (London: Random House, 2016), 70–1.
 - 20 For a detailed account of 1st/1st AD’s activities during this period see Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory*, 95–115.
 - 21 For the detailed evolution of tribal sentiment during this period see also Marc Lynch, ‘Explaining the Awakening: Engagement, Publicity, and the Transformation of Iraqi Sunni Political Attitudes’, *Security Studies* 20:1 (2011), 36–72; and McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 2: *Iraqi Perspectives: From Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004–2009* (Quantico, VA: US Marine Corps Press), 42–148.
 - 22 Austin Long, ‘The Anbar Awakening’, *Survival*, 50:2 (2008), 67–94, at 81.
 - 23 Schultz, *The Marines Take Anbar*, 232.
 - 24 General David H. Petraeus, Testimony to Senate Armed Services Committee, 8 April 2008, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/iraq_hearing_040808.html.
 - 25 See for example Silverman, *Awakening Victory*.
 - 26 See James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005–2007* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 94–104.
 - 27 Ibid., 54–5.
 - 28 Lynch, ‘Explaining the Awakening’, 50.
 - 29 Bing West, ‘COIN Theory and Securing Iraq’, *Small Wars Journal*, 26 (December 2007), accessed at <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/coin-theory-and-securing-iraq>.

- 30 Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro, 'Testing the Surge', 22–36. The authors conclude, however, that the Surge in and of itself was an insufficient explanation for the reduction of violence during the period under examination.
- 31 See John A. McCary, 'The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives', *Washington Quarterly*, 32:1 (2009), 43–59, at 50.
- 32 McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1, viii.
- 33 Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory*, 199; and Lynch, 'Explaining the Awakening', 44.
- 34 Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', 77.
- 35 Interview with Brigadier General Robert B. Neller, Deputy Commanding General 1 MEF, in McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1, 168.
- 36 Lynch, 'Explaining the Awakening', 47.
- 37 See Russell W. Glenn, interview with Lieutenant General S. MacFarland, 'Insights on Illusions of Victory and Iraq', *Parameters*, 48:1 (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 2018), 15–25, at 20.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 28.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 40 McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1, 151.
- 41 Lieutenant Colonel Dan Kuehl, who dealt with the Ameriyah Awakening, admitted that 'I am still not sure why Abu Abed and his men came forward when they did.' Dan Kuehl, 'Testing Galula in Ameriyah: The People Are the Key', *Military Review* (March–April 2009), 72–80, at 77.
- 42 For an outsider's reflection on this tendency, see Jean Michelin, 'What Generation Kill Tells a French Soldier about US Military Culture', *War on the Rocks* (24 May 2018), <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/what-generation-kill-tells-a-french-soldier-about-u-s-military-culture/>. Michelin, a major in the French army who served alongside American forces in Afghanistan, detects in the US way of war '[an] arguably Jominian approach to warfare that tends to favour the scientific combination of kinetic effects over a more politically aware vision of the conflict'.
- 43 Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1, 612.
- 44 Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', 81.
- 45 Interview with General Richard Zilmer in McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 1, 151. Zilmer admitted that US support for the Awakening was destructive to the provincial government that the coalition was simultaneously trying to establish in Anbar.
- 46 Specifically, Anbar's lucrative gas field. See Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory*, 108.
- 47 Sheik Ahmad Bezia Fteikhan al Rishawi, interviewed February 2009 in McWilliams and Wheeler, *Al Anbar Awakening*, vol. 2, 48–9.
- 48 Long, 'The Anbar Awakening', 82.
- 49 Frederick W. Kagan, 'How We'll Know We've Won', *Weekly Standard* (8 May 2008), www.washingtonexaminer.com/weekly-standard/how-well-know-when-weve-won.
- 50 One of the reasons he was provided such latitude was the absence of Iraq's Vice President Jalal Talibani, who hitherto had expertly mediated tensions

between Shia and Sunni elements within government, but who suffered a stroke in December 2012 and was thus unable to restrain Maliki's targeting of the Sunni community in Anbar and elsewhere.

- 51 Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory*, 179.
- 52 The US army Iraq War report draws the picture of an Iraqi army crippled by poor leadership, overlapping levels of command, absenteeism, corruption and sectarianism. See Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 2: *Surge and Withdrawal 2007–11* (Carlisle, PA: United States Army War College Press, 2019), 589–93.
- 53 The British government's appreciation of the strategic value of the British presence in Iraq was not misguided. As the diplomat Sir Mark Etherington noted at the time, the so-called special relationship should, in the American view, '[b]e founded on results. Where Britain was unable to influence a political or military outcome it was simply not invited to the table.' See *Revolt on the Tigris* (London: Hurst and Co., 2005), 25.
- 54 *The Report of the Iraq Enquiry*, section 9.8 Conclusions: The Post-Conflict Period, 'Planning for Withdrawal', 485. See also Huw Bennett, 'The Reluctant Counterinsurgents: Britain's Absent Surge in Southern Iraq' in Gventer et al. (eds.) *The New Counterinsurgency Era in Critical Perspective*, 278–96.
- 55 General Jonathan Shaw, who would take command of British forces in the south in 2007, was well aware of the fundamental weakness of the British position, particularly with respect to its US allies. After a meeting with US General George Casey in January 2007 he was moved to state, '[You] could tell that at the very top-level our countries were now on different paths, and asking military people to ... contrive military justifications for stuff that fundamentally is underwritten by different political directions ... [I] don't [think] the Americans were ever very comfortable with our military plans from that moment.' Quoted in Daniel Marston, 'Operation TELIC VIII to XI: Difficulties of Twenty-First-Century Command', *Journal of Strategic Studies* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1672161>, 4.
- 56 See in particular David H. Ucko, 'Lessons from Basra: The Future of British Counterinsurgency', *Survival*, 52:4 (2010), 131–58. The British army's report into Operation Telic concluded that at the time of the 2003 invasion and for a significant period after, the army did not have a widespread and deep professional understanding of COIN. See British Army, *Operations in Iraq, January 2005–May 2009 (Op Telic 5–13)*, November 2010, Executive Summary, Point 15, 3–4.
- 57 Long claims that the British army abided by its COIN doctrine in the early stages of Op TELIC. See *The Soul of Armies*, 190. However, this is contradicted by both David Ucko in 'Lessons from Basra', 134–5, and also Warren Chin, 'Where Did It All Go Wrong? Reassessing British Counterinsurgency in Iraq', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 2:4 (2008), 119–37. Indeed, the British campaign in southern Iraq was not officially designated a COIN campaign until 2009.
- 58 British Army, *Operations in Iraq*, Part 2, ch. 1: Doctrine. The report states that 'UK Officers who attended ACSC and HCSC (The Advanced and the

Higher Command and Staff Courses, respectively) after 1997, who then served in Op TELIC in ranks from Major to Major General, received little or no education or training in COIN'. See para. 112.

- 59 Ucko, 'Lessons from Basra', 135.
- 60 The official British army report on Operation Telic admitted, 'Most MND [Multi-National Division] Commanders from Company to Division considered the intelligence available to them to be inadequate, that there were insufficient ISTAR [Intelligence, Satellite, Targeting and Reconnaissance] assets and that the standardised force wide continuity and intelligence databases that had been so useful in Northern Ireland were either inadequate or absent.' See British Army, *Operations in Iraq*, ch. 2, 'Inform', para. 205.
- 61 In addition, the Foreign Office had been unable to persuade its Arabists to support either the CPA or the British military effort in the south. Etherington, *Revolt on the Tigris*, 29.
- 62 The British army's own report stated, 'The lack of an effective civilian organisation ... forced additional responsibilities onto the shoulders of military officers who found themselves involved with projects and tasks that crossed all four lines of operation and often operating well beyond their training and experience.' See British Army, *Operations in Iraq*, 21.
- 63 Lesley Adrienne Payne, 'Allied Civilian Enablers and the Helmand Surge' in McFate and Laurence (eds.) *Social Science Goes to War*, 216–17. Prior to service in Helmand, Payne had been deployed in Basra, where she was exposed to British methods.
- 64 For an excellent study of the Jaish al Mahdi see Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Krohley served as a member of a Human Terrain Team (HTT) in Baghdad in 2008.
- 65 For an informed analysis of the planning for Operation SINBAD see *The Report of the Iraq Enquiry*, section 9.5, June 2006–27 June 2007, 37–40. See also Justin Maciejewski, 'Best Effort: Operation Sinbad and the Iraq Campaign' in Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan (eds.) *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 157–75.
- 66 Some would argue that had the British government provided military commanders with greater physical resources, the story would have been different. The counter to that argument is that those military commanders still relied upon the permission of the host-nation client to apply those resources to the problem.
- 67 Ibid., 162.
- 68 Shirreff testimony to the Iraq Enquiry, quoted in Marston, 'Operation Telic VIII to XI', 4.
- 69 Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army*, 73.
- 70 See Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol.1, 635.
- 71 Maciejewski, 'Best Effort', 157–75.
- 72 Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1, 642.
- 73 *The Report of the Iraq Enquiry*, Section 9.5, June 2006–27 June 2007, 185. The British Joint Intelligence Committee asserted that post-Sinbad the JAM had become politically even *more* assertive.
- 74 Ibid. For an in-depth background to these negotiations see 168–80.

- 75 Ian Thomas, *The British Experience in Iraq 2007: A Perspective on the Utility of Force* (Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies, 2007), 45–55.
- 76 Secret Intelligence Service, otherwise known as MI6.
- 77 See British Army, *Operations in Iraq 2005–2009*, 59.
- 78 A.J.S. Storrie, ‘Talking to the “Enemy”: Informal Conflict Termination in Iraq’, *British Army Review* No. 148 (Winter 2009/10), 13–27, at 20.
- 79 Jack Fairweather, *A War of Choice: The British in Iraq 2003–2009* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 304.
- 80 Richard Iron, ‘The Charge of the Knights’, *The RUSI Journal*, 158:1 (2013), 54–62, at 61.
- 81 *The Report of the Iraq Enquiry*, section 9.6, June 2007 to April 2008, 334. See also Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 2 356.
- 82 For background to the planning of the Charge of the Knights operation, see *The Report of the Iraq Enquiry*, 342–54.
- 83 Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 2, 358.
- 84 *Ibid.*, 359.
- 85 Moqtada al-Sadr had by this point withdrawn support to the Iraqi government and denied it access to revenue gathered from the port of Um Qasr.
- 86 Brigadier Julian Free, the British Brigade commander responsible for Basra, was ejected from a meeting between Maliki, General Lloyd Austin and State Department representatives. See Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 337.
- 87 *Ibid.*
- 88 On 1 May 2008 Christopher Prentice, British ambassador to Iraq, met Vice President Hashemi in Baghdad, who attributed the ceasefire in Basra ‘entirely to the ‘role of Iran’’. See *The Report of the Iraq Enquiry*, section 9.6, 27 June 2007–May 2008, p. 357. See also Fairweather, *A War of Choice*, 338.
- 89 Interview with General Jonathan Shaw in Tim Ripley, *Operation Telic: The British Campaign in Iraq 2003–2009* (n.p.: Telic-Herrick Publications, 2004), 387.
- 90 Malkasian, *Illusions of Victory*, 197.
- 91 For more on the problem of controlling outcomes see Geraint Hughes and Christian Tripodi, ‘Anatomy of a Surrogate: Historical Precedents and Implications for Contemporary Counterinsurgency and Counter-Terrorism’, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 20:1 (2009), 1–35.
- 92 General Richard Zilmer was 1 MEF commander during the initial stages of the Anbar Awakening. It was he who empowered MacFarland to engage with Sattar et al. As MacFarland himself states, ‘I could not have asked for a better boss than General Richard C. Zilmer. To be honest, if I had been working for an Army headquarters, I don’t know that the Awakening would have happened.’ See Glenn, ‘Insights on Illusions of Victory and Iraq’, 21.
- 93 Rayburn and Sobchak, *The US Army in the Iraq War*, vol. 1, 619.
- 94 Some challenge the notion that Lawrence displayed a preternatural understanding of the Arab tribes. See Sean McMeekin, *Ottoman Endgame: War, Revolution and the Making of the Modern Middle East, 1908–1923* (London: Penguin, 2015).

8 Political Warfare in Afghanistan: Helmand Province, 2006–12

- 1 Mike Martin, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict 1978–2012* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 231.
- 2 Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan 2001–2014* (London: Bodley Head, 2017).
- 3 See for example Sherard Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul: The Inside Story of the West's Afghanistan Campaign* (London: Harper Press, 2012); Alex Marshall and Tim Bird, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Christina Lamb, *Farewell Kabul: How the West Ignored Pakistan and Lost Afghanistan* (London: William Collins, 2016); and Thomas Barwell, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). Perhaps the most comprehensive highlighting of coalition missteps comes courtesy of the 'Afghanistan Papers'. Consisting of thousands of pages of interviews and testimonies secured from official sources, the papers reveal a campaign damned by repeated confusion over objectives, endemic corruption on the part of local clients and Western civilian contractors, a generic lack of understanding of the country, and intentionally misleading reports on the part of military commanders and senior policymakers as to the progress of the campaign. See *The Washington Post*, 'At War with the Truth' (9 December 2019), www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/.
- 4 It is addressed in a more concerted way by Mats Berdal in 'Landscape of the Mind: Stabilisation and Statebuilding in Afghanistan', *Ethnopolitics*, 18:5 (2019), 526–43.
- 5 Theo Farrell, 'Improving in War: Military Adaptation and the British in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 2006–2009', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 33:4 (2010), 567–94.
- 6 Berdal, 'Landscape of the Mind', 530.
- 7 For a scathing analysis of the relationship between Britain's faltering campaign in southern Iraq and the decision to commit to Helmand, see Bennett, 'The Reluctant Counterinsurgents', 286–7.
- 8 Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 142. ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) was the UN Mission to Afghanistan.
- 9 *Angrez* = English. Mike Martin points to Britain's imperial past as a toxic factor in conditioning local sentiment. See *An Intimate War*, 159.
- 10 Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 151.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 142. Farrell is quoting General Rob Fry, Royal Marines (RM), then deputy chief of the Defence Staff.
- 12 Even at the height of the campaign, staffs of incoming formations of Task Force Helmand (TFH) received only five days' instruction on matters such as Helmandi politics and society, strategic messaging, and Afghan, US and coalition perspectives on the campaign. See Directorate Land Warfare,

Lessons Exploitation Centre, Operation Herrick Campaign Study (Ministry of Defence, 2015), ch. 5:8 ‘Doctrine’, para. 12 ‘Examples of Study Week Programmes’.

- 13 Sims, *The Human Terrain System*, 289.
- 14 For much of their early deployment to Helmand in 2006–7 the British were denied any proper doctrinal basis for understanding the nature of the fight. Despite initially undertaking what was promoted as a peace-support-style stabilisation operation, the existing stabilisation doctrine was considered so unsuited for purpose that they were forced to rely instead upon extant COIN doctrine (AFM 1-10 Counterinsurgency) that even the army considered unhelpful. (It would eventually be updated in 2009.) Stabilisation doctrine was rewritten three times before being completely replaced in 2008 with an entirely new publication (JDP 3-40). By this point, however, Helmand had been reclassified as a COIN campaign and British commanders were in receipt of the then new US COIN doctrine (FM 3-24), which was made available to British commanders in late 2007.
- 15 With respect to plagiarism in particular, see Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology*, 117–21.
- 16 See Smith and Jones, *The Political Impossibility of Modern Counterinsurgency*, 39–40.
- 17 Hew Strachan, ‘Strategy in Theory; Strategy in Practice’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42:2 (2019), 170–90, at 178.
- 18 FM 3-24 reminds its readers that ‘[t]he most important attitude remains that of the HN (Host Nation) population. In the end, its members determine the ultimate victor’. See ch. 1: Insurgency and Counterinsurgency, 1-21-22.
- 19 FM 3-24 states that COIN operations combine offensive, defensive and stability operations to achieve ‘[t]he stable and secure environment needed for effective governance, essential services, and economic development’. See ch. 5: ‘Executing Counterinsurgency Operations’, 5.1.
- 20 Summed up by Bernard Fall’s quote, ‘When a country is being subverted, it is not being outfought, but out-administered.’ See ‘The Theory and Practice of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency’, *Naval War College Review*, 18:3 (1965), 21–39, at 34.
- 21 See in particular Hazelton, ‘The “Hearts and Minds” Fallacy’, 80–113.
- 22 Robert Egnell, ‘A Western Insurgency in Afghanistan’, *Joint Force Quarterly*, 70:3 (2013), 8–15.
- 23 See also David Kilcullen, ‘Two Schools of Classical Counterinsurgency’, blog post, *Small Wars Journal* (January 2007), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/two-schools-of-classical-counterinsurgency>.
- 24 For a stimulating discussion of the misplaced faith of COIN doctrine in the restorative powers of government ‘legitimacy’ see Samuel R. Greene, *Pathological Counterinsurgency: How Flawed Thinking about Elections Leads to Counterinsurgency Failure* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).
- 25 In 2009, analysts would claim that ‘[a]lthough the situation in Helmand is serious, a coherent, sufficiently resourced strategy that focuses on the proven principles of COIN can reverse the course of the war in one of Afghanistan’s most menacing provinces’. See Jeffrey A. Dressler, *Afghanistan Report 2*:

Securing Helmand: Understanding and Responding to the Enemy (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2009), 4.

- 26 ‘Clear, Hold, Build’ was amended by General Stanley McChrystal in 2009 to ‘Shape, Secure, Develop’. In British COIN Doctrine AFM 1-10 (2009) it was adjusted to ‘Engage, Secure, Develop’. See Emile Simpson, ‘Gaining the Influence Initiative’ in British Army Review Special Report *Learning from Conflict: Afghanistan 4:1* (2015), 86–98, at 95. However, the basic conceit remains the same: manipulate the security environment to one’s advantage in order to promote socio-economic development, thus generating further security and, ultimately, government authority.
- 27 See Jackson, ‘Government in a Box?’, 100.
- 28 Ibid., 101.
- 29 For a highly critical analysis of the effect of economic development in reducing insurgent violence, particularly its often counterintuitive *destabilising* effect, see Report on Wilton Park Conference 1022 ‘Winning Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan: Assessing the Effectiveness of Development Aid in COIN Operations’ (2010), www.wiltonpark.org.uk/winning-hearts-minds-in-afghanistan-assessing-the-effectiveness-of-development-aid-in-coin-operations/, 2–3.
- 30 Shafer, ‘The Unlearned Lessons of Counterinsurgency’, 70.
- 31 Mike Martin argues that the lack of language skills was critical in this respect, and that the ability to simply sit down both with ordinary Helmandis as well as other actors more intimately involved in the processes at play, and so gain a grasp of their worldview, was thoroughly compromised by this capability gap, one that was unable to be bridged by the use of interpreters. See *An Intimate War*, 234–6.
- 32 For more on the distance between doctrine and reality, see Berdal, ‘Landscape of the Mind’, 531–41.
- 33 See Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan 2002–2007* (London: Hurst and Co., 2006), 33–79.
- 34 *An Intimate War*, 1–2. Martin was an anthropologist by background, and a fluent Pashtu-speaker.
- 35 For more on the Taliban’s flexible approach to the matter of education, see Antonio Giustozzi and Claudio Franco, ‘The Battle for the Schools: The Taliban and State Education’ (Afghan Analysts Network, 2011), 1–28, http://m.protectingeducation.org/sites/default/files/documents/afghanistan_analysts_network_battle_for_schools.pdf.
- 36 For a supportive account of the conflict dynamics in Shin Kalay at this time, see Captain John Bethell, ‘Accidental Insurgents’, *British Army Review Special Report Learning from Conflict: Afghanistan 4:1* (2015), 108–24.
- 37 The broader military tendency to favour simplistic understandings of social reality is well explored in David B. Edwards, “‘The perfect counterinsurgent’: Reconsidering the Case of Major Jim Gant”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 31:2 (2020), 420–44, at 425, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2020.1713554>. Edwards notes the military’s widespread enthusiasm for a ‘tribal’ strategy in Afghanistan circa 2010 without displaying any real understanding of what the concept of tribe actually meant in Afghan society.

- 38 Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 75.
- 39 Some military actors on the ground of course were entirely cognisant of the delta between the generalised theory of effective COIN offered by doctrine, and the contrasting reality of Helmand's societal structures. See Major Joe Winch, 'Is the Simultaneous Promotion of Security and Development a Success?' British Army Review, Special Report: *Learning from Conflict: Afghanistan 4.2* (2016), 60–71, at 65.
- 40 See James Scott, 'Patron Client Politics and Political Change in Southeast Asia' in Steffen Schmidt, Laura Gausti, Carl Lande and James Scott (eds.) *Friends, Followers and Factions: A Reader in Political Clientelism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 123–46.
- 41 Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 111–14.
- 42 Jackson, 'Government in a Box?', 104.
- 43 Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, 179.
- 44 Martin, *An Intimate War*, 6.
- 45 Carter Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 242–61. Malkasian describes the process of internecine competition that erupted in Garmser following the suppression of Taliban influence.
- 46 For an account of this period see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 15–34.
- 47 As Martin states, it was land, not Islam, that was the cause of the revolt. See *An Intimate War*, 6.
- 48 Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser*, 266.
- 49 Ibid., 241. Malkasian was 'warned off' the subject of land reform by local PRT representatives.
- 50 Flynn et al., *Fixing Intel*. General Flynn was the senior ISAF intelligence commander in Afghanistan at the time.
- 51 Ibid., 10.
- 52 Ibid., 11.
- 53 The British army's official report into Operation Herrick noted that fully trained Cultural Advisors (CULADS) were not employed on operations in Helmand until 2010, four years after the initial British deployment there. See *Operation Herrick Campaign Study*, ch. 5:3 (Information Operations and Outreach) para. 31.
- 54 Christopher Griffin, 'British and American Military Operations in the Battle of Helmand, 2006–2011', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:2 (2013), 411–29. Griffin notes that, 'while British and US commanders and politicians continually exhibited the will to implement a population-centric COIN approach, the situation in Helmand led the British and US militaries to fight a primarily conventional war, even following the McChrystal changes in 2009', 413.
- 55 Cowper-Coles, *Cables from Kabul*, 64–5. It was an approach that prompted Brigadier John Lorimer, commander of the British Task Force Helmand, to admit in June 2007 that British forces were just 'mowing the lawn'. See *Daily Telegraph*, 'British Troops Hunt the Taliban in Afghanistan', 2 September 2007, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1561956/British-troops-hunt-the-Taliban-in-Afghanistan.html.
- 56 King, 'Understanding the Helmand Campaign', 322.

- 57 Griffin, 'British and American Military Operations', 424.
- 58 Bethell, 'Accidental Insurgents', 119. For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between the British army and COIN doctrine at this stage, see Tom Dyson, *Organisational Learning and the Modern Army: A New Model for Lessons Learned Processes* (London: Routledge, 2019).
- 59 See *Operation Herrick Campaign Study*, introduction, xxxi, para. 15a. The campaign study reveals that British formations only received five hours' instruction on the subject of COIN theory prior to departure for Helmand. See ch. 5:8, note to para. 11.
- 60 Sergio Catignani, "'Getting COIN" at the Tactical Level in Afghanistan: Reassessing Counter-Insurgency Adaptation in the British Army', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 35:4 (2012), 513–39, at 525. See also *Operation Herrick Campaign Study*, introduction, xxxi, para. 15a, and ch. 5.8 Doctrine, para. 6.
- 61 Catignani, 'Getting COIN', 537. Catignani challenges Farrell's assertion that the British army was an effective learning organisation over the period examined in Farrell's 2010 'Improving in War' article.
- 62 Michael Hastings, *The Operators, The Wild and Terrifying Inside Story of America's War in Afghanistan* (London: Hachette, 2012), 258–61.
- 63 Jackson, 'Defeat in Victory', 10–12.
- 64 The Afghan Local Police are local militia units, initially trained and mentored by US Special Forces. Emerging in 2009–10 as 'Community Defence Forces', they have been implicated in numerous abuses. See Vanda Felbab-Brown, *Aspiration and Ambivalence: Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-Building in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2013), 138–61.
- 65 See Rory Stewart, 'Time to Be Honest about Afghanistan', *Financial Times*, 21 September 2012. Stewart writes, 'Generals and ministers called 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 "decisive" years in Afghanistan. None was. None will be.' www.rorystewart.co.uk/time-to-be-honest-about-afghanistan/.
- 66 Interestingly, in its analysis of the observed shortcomings in its influence activities and operations in Helmand, the British army's official report noted the primary qualities lacking in army staff headquarters. Notably: 'emotional intelligence, listening skills, cultural sensitivity, rapport, negotiation, mediation, language proficiency, psychology, sociology'. All the qualities, presumably, that a military organisation would wish to deploy as part of the 'political' fight. See *Operation Herrick Campaign Study*, ch. 5:3, note to para. 24.
- 67 King adopts a similar approach to Jackson in explaining how the attitudes of the army and Royal Marines units that campaigned in Helmand were shaped by a range of organisational factors that impacted heavily upon their chosen methods. A deeply entrenched war-fighting ethos; the impact of unit culture; the pressures of inter-service rivalry which dictated the need for the British army in particular to re-advertise its capabilities vis-à-vis the other services after the embarrassment of Iraq; all of these factors played their part. See 'Understanding the Helmand Campaign', 323–30.
- 68 David Kilcullen, 'Twenty-Eight Articles: The Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency, Article 23, Armed Civil Affairs', *Military Review* (May–June 2006), 134–9.

- 69 Second Battalion of the British army's Scottish Regiment.
- 70 Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 211.
- 71 For an example of the study material, see Mackay and Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict*, 62–72.
- 72 For the background to the operation, and the chequered reputation of the British army as a COIN practitioner to that point, see David C. Isby, 'The High Stakes Battle for the Future of Musa Qala', *CTC Sentinel*, 1:8 (2008), 2–3, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2010/06/Vol1Iss8-Art4.pdf>.
- 73 Andrew Mackay, 'The Art of Influence: How the Taliban Were Driven from a Strategic Afghan Town', *BBC News*, www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idth9a9c01-faa4-4038-b4e9-83e619460e1f.
- 74 For a detailed account of the battle see Stephen Grey, *Operation Snakebite: The Explosive True Story of an Afghan Desert Siege* (London: Penguin, 2010), 162–270.
- 75 Mackay and Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict*, 58–60.
- 76 Grey, *Operation Snakebite*, 319. Similar embarrassment occurred on another occasion when British intelligence cultivated and introduced to President Karzai what was meant to be another high-level Taliban defector, but which turned out to be a grocer from Quetta. See Gordon Corera, *The Art of Betrayal: The Secret History of MI6* (London: Pegasus Books, 2013), 399.
- 77 Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 225.
- 78 A British spokesman had said of the newly installed Mullah Salaam, "The first time we heard Mullah Salaam speak he spoke bloody well. In fact, he dominated the whole show. He gave the government message: anti-Taliban, counter-narcotics, interspersed with Koranic verses. He came across as an accomplished politician.' Thomas Donnelly and Gary J. Schmitt, 'Musa Qala: Adapting to the Realities of Modern Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars Journal* (2008), <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/96-donnelly.pdf>, 7.
- 79 Major Sergio Miller, 'A Comprehensive Failure: British Civil–Military Strategy in Helmand Province', British Army Review Special Report *Learning from Conflict: Afghanistan* 4:2, 22. Miller derides the much-celebrated Comprehensive Approach as a 'sham', 20.
- 80 Martin, *An Intimate War*, 171–2.
- 81 Semple's negotiating skills prior to the battle for Musa Qala had reputedly convinced between 400 and 800 Taliban to refrain from battle. Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 221.
- 82 See in particular Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, 'Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk', *Econometrica*, 47:2 (1979), 263–92.
- 83 Martin, *An Intimate War*, 234.
- 84 Ryan Evans, "'The Population Is the Enemy": Control, Behaviour, and Counterinsurgency in Central Helmand Province, Afghanistan' in Gventer et al. (eds.) *The New Counter-Insurgency Era in Critical Perspective*, 257–77.
- 85 Sims, *The Human Terrain System*, 323.
- 86 Evans, 'The Population Is the Enemy', 259.
- 87 Ibid., 271.
- 88 Ibid., 267.
- 89 These were battalion-sized formations of around 900 Marines and associated elements.

- 90 Malkasian, *War Comes to Garmser*, 226–7.
- 91 Ibid., 162. Malkasian states that ‘[t]he Marines and civilians on the district support team did not know who had the power... let alone how to find them. The most powerful tribal leaders in Garmser were a mystery to us. Abdullah Jan understood these things in a way that we never could.’
- 92 President Obama had announced a surge of 30,000 troops in 2009, to be followed by eventual withdrawal from 2011. His announcement of 22 June 2011 announced the effective departure of 30,000 troops by the end of 2012.
- 93 Hew Strachan, ‘Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War’, *Survival*, 52:5 (2010), 157–82.
- 94 Egnell, ‘A Western Insurgency in Afghanistan’, 10.
- 95 Jackson, ‘Government in a Box?’, 102.
- 96 The so-called Afghanistan Papers published by the *Washington Post* in December 2019 feature a significant number of interviews in which senior political, diplomatic and military personnel who were part of the predominantly US war effort lamented the lack of any identifiable strategy underpinning coalition operations in that country. www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database/.
- 97 Christopher Tuck, ‘Afghanistan, Strategy, and War Termination’, *Parameters*, 42:3 (US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2012), 44–62.
- 98 Strachan, *Strategy or Alibi?*, 166.
- 99 Ibid., 171–9.
- 100 See Martin, *An Intimate War*, 237. The theory of cognitive closure speaks of the human desire to achieve certainty and to enable decisions to be taken in the midst of highly uncertain or ambiguous environments, even when it is understood that the decision made may be wrong. See Donna M. Webster and Airi W. Kruglanski, ‘Cognitive and Social Consequences of the Need for Cognitive Closure’, *European Review of Social Psychology*, 8:1 (1997), 133–73.
- 101 BBC News, ‘Afghanistan: Marjah battle not yet won’, June 2010, www.bbc.co.uk/news/10403213.
- 102 Chris Jones, ‘Back to the Long War, Helmand Province Eight Years Later’, *Pacific Standard Magazine* (31 July 2019), <https://psmag.com/social-justice/back-to-the-long-war-helmand-province-eight-years-later>.
- 103 Martin, *An Intimate War*, 239.

9 Conclusion

- 1 ‘We Have Met the Enemy, and He Is PowerPoint’, *New York Times* (26 April 2010), www.nytimes.com/2010/04/27/world/27powerpoint.html.
- 2 Tierney, ‘Avoiding Nation-Building’, 25–36.
- 3 For an in-depth, scholarly examination of this relationship see Robert Powell, ‘Why Some Persistent Problems Persist’, *American Political Science Review*, 113:4 (2019), 980–96.
- 4 Connolly, ‘The New Imperialists’, 20.
- 5 See Casper Erichsen and David Olusoga, *The Kaiser’s Holocaust: Germany’s Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Nazism* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010). Between 1904 and 1908 in German South-West Africa (modern day

- Namibia), German colonial troops oversaw the killing or starvation of up to 100,000 San, Herero and Namaqua tribespeople. At during roughly the same period in their colonial territories in East Africa, the Maji Maji rebellion (which occurred in modern-day Tanzania) led to the deaths of some 300,000 people, mainly through starvation.
- 6 French manipulation of systems of village rule enforced inequality, marginalised the majority and empowered notables who then created a power class that the Diem government would rely upon; a relationship that would frustrate subsequent US attempts at reform. See Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms*, 262.
 - 7 Although this is disputed somewhat in Emile Simpson, 'Clausewitz's Theory of War and Victory in Contemporary Conflict', *Parameters*, 47:4 (2017–18), 1–12.
 - 8 US Army. Handbook no. 09-27: *Commander's Guide to Money As a Weapons System* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2009), 1.
 - 9 Richard Sexton, 'Aid As a Tool against Insurgency: Evidence from Contested and Controlled Territory in Afghanistan', *American Political Science Review*, 110:4 (2016), 731–49.
 - 10 Taliban assaults on educational institutions, a feature of the conflict in Afghanistan in 2006–9, subsided considerably from 2010 onwards. Alongside this transition was a clear shift in official policy. While the Taliban code of conduct (*Layha*) legitimated attacks on non-conforming schools in 2006, it dropped that approval in 2009. Thereafter, schools reopened through local-level negotiations which ceded significant control to the Taliban for curriculum design, textbook choice and teacher selection. The reduction in attacks may ultimately have been driven by pressure from communities to allow schooling, or by Taliban success in negotiating key ideological sticking points, or by strengthened political power through territorial expansion, but the precise reasons are unclear. See Giustozzi and Franco, 'The Battle for the Schools'. For more on the complexity of assessing the utility of aid money in reducing violence in Afghanistan and its general lack of strategic impact see Travis Barclay Child, 'Conflict and Counterinsurgency Aid: Drawing Sectoral Distinctions', *Journal of Development Economics*, 141(2019), 102245, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2018.06.003>, and Report on Wilton Park Conference, *Winning Hearts and Minds in Afghanistan: Assessing the Effectiveness of Aid Money in Counterinsurgency* (2010), <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/winning-hearts-minds-in-afghanistan-assessing-the-effectiveness-of-development-aid-in-coin-operations/>.
 - 11 Sexton, 'Aid As a Tool against Insurgency', 740.
 - 12 See 'France Summit: Sahel Crisis in Danger of Slipping out of Control', *BBC News* (13 January 2020), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-51061229>.
 - 13 Jackson, 'Defeat in victory', 573.
 - 14 The US RAND Corporation report by Lyle J. Morris et al., *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression below the Threshold of Major War* (2019), states that, short of actual war, military forces would be primarily responsible for training, advisory and

- human capital development missions to bolster those vulnerable to enemy Grey Zone activities. See www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2942.html.
- 15 For an excellent analysis of the Russian approach to contemporary conflict, see Ofer Fridman, *Russian “Hybrid Warfare”: Resurgence and Politicization* (London: Hurst and Co., 2018).
 - 16 Galleoti, *Russian Political War*, 32.
 - 17 Ibid., 30.
 - 18 Jānis Bērziņš, *Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defence Policy*, Policy Paper 2 (Riga: Centre for Security and Strategic Research, National Defence Academy of Latvia, April 2014), 5.
 - 19 Jack Watling and Daniel Roper, *European Allies in US Multi-Domain Operations* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2019), https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190923_european_allies_in_us_multi-domain_operations_web.pdf.
 - 20 It should be noted that many within Western government or diplomatic circles decry the use of the word ‘warfare’ in the context of largely non-military actions. See introduction to Linda Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), xx. Others claim that the term ‘warfare’ is a suitable description when multifarious lines of action are coordinated as part of a coordinated offensive. See Galleoti, *Russian Political War*, 53.
 - 21 Robinson et al., *Modern Political Warfare*, 306.
 - 22 Galleoti, *Russian Political War*, 32.
 - 23 In conjunction with a number of international researchers, the UK Defence Doctrine and Concepts Centre (DDCC) has contributed to an understanding of ‘Grey Zone’ warfare that foresees a significant role for military actors in hardening domestic vulnerabilities and targeting the enemy’s own political vulnerabilities, but in relation to the latter finds it difficult for military power to secure a natural role. See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/803970/20190519-MCDC_CHW_Info_note_10-State_of_current_policy.pdf (May 2019).

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